The Things We Keep

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Christina G. Jones

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This thesis titled

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by

CHRISTINA G. JONES

has been approved for

the Department of English

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Joan C. Connor

Professor of English

Robert Frank

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

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The Things We Keep

Director of Thesis: Joan C. Connor

This thesis is a collection of nine short stories reflecting upon Appalachia from a contemporary feminist Appalachian writer. While the setting of the collection is Southern Ohio, the characters are not limited to an ultimate place of being and neither are the characters. Told through the eyes of a young woman searching for her biological mother, the stories are written with Appalachian story-telling heritage, parable qualities, unexpected endings, and genuine dialect. Many of the characters are faced with moral dilemmas that cause them to think about what family, love, abandonment, oppression, joy, and identity are truly about. A central theme making the stories cohesive is a set of storage units and the contents each unit holds, much like our minds and the memories we choose to discard or keep.
DEDICATION

To my grandma, Gladys Baker—you couldn’t write your name but I will write it for you.

To my Momma, Gale Allen—unconditional means always and no matter what.

To my niece, Haven Davis, and my nephews, Andrew and Wyatt Davis—
if your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough. Dream big and take chances.

To my soul mate, Ryan Jones—thanks for waiting for me.
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Writing fiction requires the ability to tell a story and to tell it well. To some people “telling it well” might require the author to be able to write in a way in which the reader is unable to forget the story long after the story or novel is read. I agree with this notion, but only if the author is able to establish logos, ethos, and pathos to go along with it. A good story or novel allows the reader to believe the writer has the experience and knowledge of a subject matter and can be trusted to deliver accuracy. It also requires that authors create credible and consistent characters. I believe that a good piece of fiction will make the reader feel something. The “something” might not always be able to be categorized, but the emotional connection has to be there. It must compel the reader to return time and time again to the work’s pages. As a reader, I have emotional bonds with books that invite me to come back. As a writer, I’m driven to create stories that people bond with. I’ve learned the importance of this by embracing my Appalachian storytelling heritage and I’ve been strongly influenced by writers such as Donald Ray Pollock, Bonnie Jo Campbell, Dorothy Allison, Sheila Kay Adams, and Maya Angelou—just to name a few. Each of them has contributed to what I have learned. Specifically, Pollock provides an amazing example of structure and balancing external action and characterization, as well as dialect and dialogue, and publishing strategies. Campbell provides a feminist approach to regionalized oppression. Allison and Adams provide examples of Appalachian storytelling as female heritage and how to incorporate autobiographical information. And while I have also learned how to incorporate
Appalachian folk lore into my story-telling, Angelou provides me with the inspiration to tell my stories with metaphorical and emotional conviction.

When I was younger, I did not realize that Appalachian story-telling was shaping me. I would sit at the feet of my illiterate grandmother, peeling spring green Granny Smith apples and eating the wedges from her twenty-year-old pocket knife, while listening to her tell stories about uncles I never met. I learned to listen for the moral of the story. I would wait to hear what transgressions I should never commit. I was five when she passed, and I did not realize the relevance of her impact on me until I was an adult.

Choosing to go back to college when I was thirty and a part-time waitress at a local Pizza Hut was the moment in which I realized what part she had played in my destiny and what it was that I was born to do. I was a good waitress because I would listen to people’s stories about life, provide them with what they needed from me, and wish them a better week or “Congratulations” when it was deserved. I was genuine with my thoughts and actions—and that’s what people want. While I was listening to their stories, I kept thinking about the life lessons that came along with them. I would dream of different ways in which their stories might develop and what would make them more interesting. I listened to their dialogue when they didn’t know I was listening—picking up the ways in which their dialects and diction were unique. I was in love with people and their stories, just as my grandmother was. The difference between us, though, is that I have the ability to read and write. She was never taught that her voice was valid or that her story-telling ability was a talent perfected by well-tuned ears for detail and relevance. She was never even taught how to write her name. The day I started school, I felt it was
my responsibility not only to tell my story, but my grandmother’s story, and to write for the women who wanted to tell their stories but never could. That day it became personal.

I had primarily read many romance novels as my mother had done as a stay-at-home mother when I was a teenager. My issues with the romance novels were that none of the characters felt real. Their love and their language never felt real. So I began seeking out Appalachian literature to find how others were creating actual people I could recognize. I stumbled upon Donald Ray Pollock. His short story collection called “Knockemstiff” was on the reading list for my very first fiction class as an undergraduate. I read it and I loved it.

What I love about Pollock’s writing is that I believe in his logos, ethos, and pathos. I believe that he knows what it’s like to see someone huff Bactine out of a garbage bag to get high, or to know of a mentally handicapped youth who is used and bullied and has no one to stand up for him. These are just some of the subjects that Pollock writes about. His use of dialogue and detail are so specifically correct that he commands authority over it:

It was the third set of wheels in a year. We lived on soup beans and fried bread, but drove around Knockemstiff like rich people. Just that morning, I'd heard my mother get on the phone and rag to her sister, the one that lived in town. "The sonofabitch is crazy, Margie," she said. "We couldn't even pay the electric bill last month." I was sitting in front of the dead TV, watching watery blood trickle down her pale calves. She'd tried to shave them with the old man's straight razor, but her legs were like sticks of butter. A black fly kept buzzing around her bony ankles, dodging her mad slaps (Pollock 5).

In this excerpt of his story “Real Life,” I never doubt the authenticity of the mother or the son. I recognize that Appalachian people speak in a dialect that combines syllables and sound into a grouping of words that come out as one—it is specific and regionalized
language. I also don’t doubt the content because he has balanced the description of the 
external action and the characterization so well, as a reader, I feel as though I am there in 
the room with the characters. The most interesting stories never told are about people 
who survived when economics and nature were against them. For these reasons, in my 
story, “243: Jill Sanders,” I imagined a world in which an Appalachian man was battling 
the fall of the recession that has struck Southern Ohio very hard. There are not many jobs 
left in Portsmouth, Ohio, but there is drug dealing, mostly pot and prescription pain-pills. 

In “243: Jill Sanders,” I have incorporated the lessons in dialect and detail of 
circumstance: 

Jimmy had begun a home-grown business. He owned several acres behind his 
house in McDermott that were mainly hillside and built a dog pen that surrounded 
his investment. In the hills of Appalachia, dogs were the cheapest home security a 
man could get. Dogs trained from puppies to protect pot were known to tear off 
limbs. Jimmy had made more money selling pot in five years than he did at the 
bottling plant in ten. When people asked how things were going, he would always 
let his wife Molly have all the credit. “She’s workin’ down at the Wal-mart now. 
Who’m I to tell her she can’t work? Shit, women get jobs easier than men now, so 
I say g’on, momma.” It always seemed to get a chuckle, but everyone knew 
Molly’s minimum wage job wasn’t paying their house payment and keeping their 

Sometimes writing out dialect in dialogue can feel stereotypical. I have chosen to 
write dialect in nearly every one of my characters’ dialogue because it’s a part of who 
they are. Sometimes I feel constrained as an Appalachian writer as I have to avoid 
Appalachian English in formal papers. It is such a big part of who I am. It feels wrong to 
deny it to my characters who are so deeply rooted in their surroundings. 

Traditional Appalachian story-telling, like a parable, also focuses on a major 
event in which a person changes surrounding a choice. This may be why, at times, I feel
like a very plot-driven writer and continually work hard to balance out plot with character and detail. However, in “243: Jill Sanders,” I have included the parable quality:

Keith gritted his teeth and pointed his finger at her, growling at her low blow. He knew she was right, but it felt like gasoline had been poured on the last ounce of integrity he had left and set ablaze. “Fine, you want me to take it all back, that’s fine, I can do that. I’ve done it before.” He grabbed the black garbage bag from beside the couch and his shotgun from behind the door (32).

Because Donald Ray Pollock is such an influential writer for me, it will come to no surprise to my readers that I have been influenced by the way he has published his work, as well, with his debut book being a short story collection, and then a novel following. “Knockemstiff” was a great short story collection because it linked the stories by setting, but each one of the stories could have been written as a novel if that’s what he wanted. Some of the stories were also published individually from the collection. I envisioned my stories as a collection in which any of them could be published separately, without the framework and the recurrent character Abygale Rose in “Finders Keepers”, “Fragile: This End Up”, and “The Things We Keep”. I am aware that the stories of Abygale Rose are contingent on each other, however, it is important to me that the others can stand alone. I can imagine a separate novel for the characters in each of my stories, but this is the beginning. Pollock’s novel, The Devil All the Time, is a gritty and regionalized novel that picks up with two characters from his previous collection “Knockemstiff”. I’m sure many other authors have introduced characters from other works, but Pollock was my first impression of the how successful and interesting this can be. In Pollock’s novel, Ohio is the setting and there are two recurrent characters form his
short story collection. However, two serial killers on the road extend the range of setting for future stories he may want to write.

I have tried to write in this possibility, as well. In my short story “109: Hannah Mitchel,” the main character is a blind woman from Southern Ohio who has the experience of knowing people from other regions by being a concession stand worker at the local fair. She is romantically involved with a character named Taco Tom who has travelled to New Orleans and been part of a freak show before they were outlawed. Through Taco Tom I am able to extend the setting’s range. In “403: Nancy Roe,” the lead male character is a truck driver that leaves behind victims and families of victims that can be future characters, as well.

While Pollock was a very large influence on my writing, I found that he did not create many positive female characters. His female characters are stuck in a world of prostitution or submission and male brutality, which are very real fates for Appalachian women, but they are not the only possible fates. He is very good at writing real men, but his stereotyping of Appalachian women is harsh and limiting:

Del was with a woman he couldn’t get rid of, no matter what he did or said. Every time he dumped her off at the group home, she beat him back to his room with a fresh load in her automatic pill dispenser and another wad of clean underwear. To make matters worse, she kept bugging the shit out of him with these fish sticks she reeled up from the bottomless pond of a plastic purse. They were cold and greasy, feathered with gray lint. And even though she was the best woman Del Murray had ever been with—gobs of bare knuckle sex, the latest psychotropic drugs, a government check—he was still embarrassed to be seen with her in public (Knockemstiff 96).

I began looking at females portrayed in Appalachian fiction.
While Bonnie Jo Campbell is noted as being in the same realm of fiction writing as Pollock, a regional writer who focuses on socioeconomic hardships, her characters branch out into a morally complex world, where women are out of the kitchen and the backseats of Buicks. Her short story collection “American Salvage” links not only women in the world but women to the world:

“Cocoa-buttered girls were stretched out on the public beach in apparently random alignments, but maybe if a weather satellite zoomed in on one of those bodies and then zoomed back out, the photos would show the curving beach itself was another woman, a fractal image made up of the particulate sunbathers. All the beaches pressed together might form female landmasses, female continents, female planets and galaxies. No wonder men felt tense” (Campbell 39).

I was happy to find an anthology that focused specifically on female Appalachian writers called “Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia.” In it are 105 writers who write about life for women Appalachia. Those who have had the most success are: Dorothy Allison, Nikki Giovanni, Maggie Anderson, Barbara Kingsolver, and Annie Dillard. The most interesting and discouraging fact I found in the introduction to the anthology is that in The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States, only 8 out of the 1,000 are Appalachian women (2). This is disheartening because while I, as a writer, am searching for women who write our stories well, only a few of the great female fiction writers from my region are included in a new and evolving canon that is supposed to be including minorities.

Sheila Kay Adams’ short story “The Easter Frock” is anthologized frequently because she demonstrates Appalachian story-telling as an oral tradition, but also as a meticulous craft and skill, as well. While the reader can see from the opening line of the story how the tradition is functioning, the reader can also pick up on the relevance in re-
telling a story from a female perspective: “Bertha Franklin used to love to sit on her front porch and tell me stories about what Sodom was like back when she was a girl” (Ballard 8).

Her story inspired me to cast Abygale Rose in “Finders Keepers” as a storyteller second to story-teller Gladys who tells the original stories about women, one of whom could be her biological mother. Gladys serves as an analogue to my grandmother in my collection. She not only cannot read or write, like my grandmother, but she can also tell a story creatively and from her memory like my grandmother could.

Originally my short story collection focused on who Abygale’s biological father was. I felt that her motivation for searching for him was to show that she is Generation X of Appalachia, searching for the facts of her paternity. However, when I started digging deep into the purpose of my collection, I realized that the female characters in the stories were really the heart of why I was writing, and the original focus did not highlight the female secondary characters as I had intended it to. I read a short story collection by Elizabeth Strout called “Olive Kitteridge,” in which the secondary characters became the primary focus in an un-anticipated way that was both enticing and mesmerizing. I did not feel, however, that my secondary characters were being highlighted; therefore, in revision, I cast the female characters more prominently.

Growing up, I heard many stories about the men in my family; I knew who they were and what they did. But I knew very few stories about the women in my family, because they had taken a backseat to the men. I wanted to guide my female characters to
discover the lives of the women in their pasts, and to find themselves in the process, as I have. Dorothy Allison’s work explores the lives of women in this way.

Her novel Bastard Out of Carolina tells the story of Ruth Anne, who was named after her aunt—Aunt Ruth. In her story, Allison incorporates some biographical facts, mainly the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother’s third boyfriend (Ballard 10).

Appalachian culture is frequently stereotyped as being an abusive culture. It was important to me in my writing to highlight the consequences of abuse and the ability to escape abuse. In “317: Eliza Cable” I wrote about a woman who escapes the oppression that traditional religion can cause and the mental abuse that goes along with it. The story in my collection that emphasizes abuse the most, though, is “403: Nancy Roe.” The story suggests that no matter how long a person has been in an abusive relationship, there is a way out. Nancy has a plan and waits for Hank to leave so that she can, with the help of family and friends, escape his abuse. Much as Allison incorporated biographical information into her story, I do as well. Nancy’s witnessing her grandfather abuse her grandmother is drawn from my life. I turned away from my first glimpse of physical abuse and stared into a tin cup hanging from the kitchen window sill, and was scurried away from the situation by my father. When my grandfather died, I chose the tin cup to remember him by. Having this bit of memorabilia helped me write the end story of my collection, “The Things We Keep.”

I have always been interested in the things people choose to keep and those people discard. The idea for the framework of my story came from a family member having the fear of being “discarded” for being gay. There’s also autobiographical
information in the story “118: Melissa Jones.” I suffered four miscarriages before I went back to school. Each time I was pregnant, I would get gifts from people hoping that this time was “the one.” After the last miscarriage, I put all of the baby items in a storage unit and kept it for years—I just couldn’t let go of the “maybe, one day” feeling. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that Melissa Jones has is actually based on my mother. My mother had PTSD from being a paramedic in the 1990s, and my sister, brother, and I would come home from school to find her in a PTSD hallucination. She would not know whether we were real or a hallucination, and we suffered physically and mentally from the episodes. However, mental illness in Appalachia is not well treated. It seems that the common treatment is drugs that often lead to substance abuse and submersion therapy, in which the patient is sent into a normal environment in order to rationalize behavior. Melissa Jones goes into Wal-Mart and has to learn to recognize when her daughter is not real. The ending of the story is abrupt. There is something missing and shocking that Melissa and Tim would just go out to eat after Melissa’s episode. People with PTSD enter in everyday life do mundane tasks but often end up in extreme situations, but then have to carry on their day as normally as possible.

In the latest issue of Journal of Appalachian Studies, there is an article called “Mental Illness, Institutionalization and Oral History in Appalachia: Voices of Psychiatric Attendants,” that details some of the hardest factors of mental health to beat, noting:

“Research has established that psychological distress is more prevalent in the region due, in a large part, to socioeconomic stressors. Structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, transportation difficulties, and lack of education have inhibited access to proper mental health care in the region.”
In addition, Appalachian cultural beliefs and stigmas related to mental illness have complicated treatment (Schrift 86).

Many Appalachian writers choose to write about mental illness. Mental illness is a very real and prevalent problem in Appalachia. I choose to write about it because I feel that I can bring logos, ethos, and pathos to a story that contains it. I had a very personal moment the day I moved to Athens, Ohio, since my mother had been institutionalized in what is now called Athens Behavioral Healthcare Center. My moving to Athens and choosing to be there for an education three decades after my mother had been taken to the center against her will, was the moment I realized the story of Melissa Jones should be a blending of us both. Prior to her three-month treatment in Athens her healing was based on Appalachian folklore of self-healing.

Folklore not only plays a part in the mental illness of many Appalachians, but it also has a lot to do with their lives and who they are. For instance, I have included several Appalachian superstitions and beliefs. In “403: Nancy Roe,” I foreground the belief that the number seven brings about God’s perfection and good will. The number appears when Nancy leaves Hank and is waiting for something good to happen. The time, 7 o’clock, is also in “The Things We Keep” as the time Abygale is going to meet Nancy.

Other contemporary Appalachian writers have written about folklore, as well. Valerie Nieman writes in “Worth” about a bird that has omniscient knowledge: “A red-winged blackbird lighted on a cattail stem, flaunted its epaulets and screamed, ‘Oh you cheat!’” (Smith 112).

Similarly, in Appalachian lore a bird in the house signifies bad luck. It can be a warning of a family member nearing death, but it can also signify a woman about to leave
a man—she just needs to find a door. According to Appalachian Folklore: Omens, Signs, and Superstitions, “If a bird flies into your house, it indicates that you will hear important news. If he cannot fly out again, the news will be about the death of someone you love. That the bird knows something, is never up for debate” (Richmond 40).

The incorporation of folklore involving birds in “Finders Keepers” is when Gladys tells Abygale:

“You got your mind all sigoggled and them birds are already in there, huh?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You gotta promise me that whatever you find out, you can weed through it and figure out what to keep and what to toss. Ain’t no use in keeping things you can’t help or change. You know that, right?” (10).

Gladys’s insistence on Abygale being able to weed out the stories she doesn’t need and to “get the bird out” is playing on the superstition that to keep it in will mean death of spirit. This is also why the last line of “Fragile: This Side Up” is “The birds were flocking and there was no door to open to let them out” (74). It is also the image I chose to end completely on:

I found myself in a storage unit: a once-empty metal carton that someone had moved out of in order to let someone else in. A container with a cement floor that held things that held memories for someone other than me. I was something private—an item in a pile of things someone chose to keep. I was something locked away. Until I opened the door and set me free (83).

I incorporate the bird imagery because of its role in Appalachian lore, but I also incorporate it because of a favorite poem. The poem, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” by Maya Angelou, was the very first poem I read as an adult and understood. I
fell in love with it instantly and knew that one day I wanted to be able to share the freedom it gave me.

The freedom to write my story, my grandmother’s story, and other women’s stories in a real and believable way is something I’ve long wanted. There really is no formula which I follow while writing a story. I imagine situations that make good fiction. Then I imagine the character and all the quirks and loves the character might have, and all the reasons they have to fight against the pressures of life. I am Appalachian and understand the way in which language frees us. To write dialect is an important choice, and I choose it. I also choose to write autobiographically in my stories in order to make the logos, ethos, and pathos strong. I feel that this collection represents my wants, dreams, memories, and abilities accurately. I work hard on my descriptions of setting, plot, and character. I want readers to feel the connection I have to the material, but to also feel something of their own. I want them to believe me and trust me, and I want them to come back to read more. I want my female characters to be strong, to stand up to the world around them, and tell their stories. I want to be a strong voice in Appalachian fiction.
REFERENCES


FINDERS KEEPERS

When you are adopted, you always wonder what it was that helped make the final decision. That thing that shoved your biological mother into saying, “I just can’t. Give her to someone who can.” You dream at night that she’s crying and wanting to hold on to you longer than the young nurse with mahogany curls will allow her to, but the frigid old doctor keeps telling her that the longer she bonds with you the harder it will be and the large clock in the background ticks but she’s not concerned about her—she’s concerned about you. Concerned that the one extra second of smelling the milk in her breasts while you lay on her chest might open your senses to help you feel hunger and the need to survive. She’s worried that not hearing her heartbeat from the outside might make it hard for you to find a home in the warm corners of elbows—that lying in a crib alone without the thump of her blood coursing in unison with yours will make your soul learn real abandonment. You dream that while she’s bleeding from your birth she takes the last ounce of energy she has to kiss your small forehead and look into your eyes the small second they peek open glazed and crusty to see the world for the first time. You dream that she is the first person you ever saw, and the fog but angelic glow she gives off looks exactly like you now. You look back as someone takes you away and you see her distraught in a sweaty bed begging God to meet you when you are old enough to love her no matter what. The dream is never about what it was that helped her say, “Okay, you can have her now,” because that never happens. You are always torn from her arms amidst her hesitancy. She always wants you.
And while you are growing, you always imagine meeting her as an adult and in this imaginary meeting she is enamored with the woman you have become. She is proud of how smart you are, and how beautiful you are, and she wishes she would have kept you. But you tell her that it’s okay, you understand why she gave you up—you don’t really need to know. Because the mother you have is a woman that you love with every ounce in your soul and she did everything right. You tell her that the moment that really matters is the one you are in at the diner over lunch, where you show her photo albums of every major moment in your life so she can feel caught up while you eat cheeseburgers and French fries, after both of you asked for no pickle—so that you can pick up the phone next week and ask her to go shopping like nothing ever happened. The conversation is never about the thing, the moment, the circumstance, in which she decided that she would not keep you. And there is never any doubt in your mind that this moment with her in which your worlds align will happen. You believe in it as much as you go to sleep at night knowing that the sun will at some point rise in the morning and you will begin another day that gets you closer to her.

My name is Abygale Rose. I’ve known since I was eight that the woman raising me is not my biological mother. I saw it in my second grade picture: how my face, my hair, my nose, none of it looks like my mother or father’s. It didn’t really bother me until I had a homework assignment to make our family tree. My teacher, Mrs. Holland, asked us to insert the names of all of our family members on branches of the trees that we drew and colored. Then she asked for us to write something that we have in common with each ancestor. That evening, while sitting at the dining room table in our small but quaint
double-wide trailer, I scratched at a knick in the varnish under my placemat.

“Momma…who gave birth to me?”

She was standing at the stove with her back turned to me, still in her meticulously ironed Professor clothing, when she rested the wooden spoon against the side of the pot she was stirring. She didn’t turn around to face me, she inhaled and exhaled slowly.

“How long have you been thinking about this?”

“Just for a few days. It’s okay, though. I know you and Daddy love me.”

She turned the burner off and pulled the towel from her waist she had tucked in the corners of her pockets to keep the chili from splashing onto her good clothes. She folded it neatly and placed it on the counter beside the sink. And then she joined me at the table in her usual spot to my right. “It was one of my very best friends. If God would have given me a sister to grow up with, it would have been her. Family isn’t always who you are born with, it’s something that you find.”

I watched out the window near the table as the light rain left tiny drops on the window pane. The tiny ones always merged in with the larger. It was true. I did not come from this mother, but she found me and kept me. Somehow I thought this conversation was going to take much more convincing to talk about. But then again, my mother was all about being honest.

“What is she like? Your friend that created me?” I didn’t want to hurt my mother but I desperately wanted to know things. It was like at my cousin’s wedding when Daddy picked me up and let me stand on his toes while we were dancing. I tried to stand with my feet in the right spot so I didn’t hurt his toes.
“She was smart. She had so many ideas about how the world should be ran so that everyone loved each other. You have her compassion. And she was beautiful. You have her high cheek bones and her laugh.” My mother put her elbow up on the table and lay her face in her hand. The palm of her hands always felt like soft warm silk on my cheeks when she kissed me at bedtime. She stared at my face with smiling eyes and moved my braid from my shoulder to my back.

“Why aren’t you still friends with her, Momma? Did she die?”

“No, sweetheart. She didn’t die. She just lives somewhere else right now and is doing big girl things.”

“Why did she give me to you?”

My mother was very rarely at a loss for words. She lectured hundreds of college students at a time. She was paid to have words to say but this question was like I had reached into her mind with my pointer finger and swirled all the words like a French fry swirling ketchup. “It’s such a big question, Aby. A big question that maybe we should have when you are big, too.”

Shiny glistening eyes emerged that day instead of words and the moment I saw them, I stopped. You’re not supposed to make Momma cry. So I put a stick-pin in the idea and pinned it to the bulletin board in my memory: Ask Momma again someday why her friend gave me away. It never went away. Every birthday I wondered about it. Every Christmas. But I never told my Momma that I missed a woman I never met because I knew that she missed her, too.
A few days after my nineteenth birthday the moment I had been waiting for arrived. My father had retired from OSCO, a steel factory in our city, and he took all of his retirement money and purchased a storage unit complex off the highway, not too far from where we live. I was preparing to go away for college and he told me that this was a good investment for them to keep steady income coming in while I was away. The truth is, his body was wearing down and the factory job had taken some of his most youthful days from him. He was tired, and this was an exciting venture that he could manage from home, so that the rest of his energy could be used doing fun things. And somehow what he had done felt like a gift to me, also. My mother was excited about it. She repeatedly asked how many people had come in the office to fill up a unit with their things. But I started noticing that she always asked a certain question every evening that felt odd.

“Did anybody we know come in?”

“Nope. Not today.”

I watched her face when he replied and it was like she was expecting someone particular. She twisted her mouth to one side in disappointment every time. And then I knew. They were expecting her.

“Momma. Why did she give me away?”

“What?”

“Why did she give me away? Please tell me this. I’ve waited years for you to tell me and I don’t mean to hurt you. I just need to know.”

I knew it was going to be a long conversation the minute my father pulled out his chair at the dining room table and sat down. My mother took her normal seat as well. So I
sat with them. “She didn’t just give you away. She gave you to me and it was a very hard decision for her. I don’t know that she would have given you away to anyone else. She chose me like I chose to love you and protect you for the rest of your life. Something happened that she had to get away from. It wasn’t you. But it would have destroyed her to stay.”

“So why are you asking if she came to the units? Why are you waiting for her to come back?”

“Because she will, one day. She has a storage unit in the complex we bought and she will come back for the contents. There is something very important in there that she will not leave behind. Our hope is that we can talk her into meeting you.”

“What is her name?”

“I swore to her that I’d never tell you. This is our way of trying to connect you without breaking her promise.”

For the first time in my life I was filled with rage over something my mother had said to me. It didn’t feel fair that she would know this information and not tell me. My father sighed and tapped his index finger against the table. He wanted to tell me, but couldn’t.

“There are things that you will learn about that will hurt you when you know about her, Aby. Things that I don’t want you to know and hurt over. But I knew this day would come and I’m trying to help you without hurting you.” My mother looked for compassion in my eyes. Something that could tell her that I understood, but I just wasn’t there yet.
She left the table and went into her office. My father tried to change the subject by asking me how my day at work went. I work at the local private-plane airport restaurant where hardly anyone new ever comes in to eat. It’s become a dingy room in which old people come in and tell stories about things that happened years ago, and where kids come after school to get greasy gravy poured over fries and hang out until their parents are off work. The pictures are bolted onto the wall and the glass is still stained with a yellow film from tobacco smoke when the place was a smoking establishment. My day had gone like every other day. I wiped tables and listened to old men’s stories and I sat on my breaks for short moments with siblings of people I went to high school with. The cook, Gladys, was the only one at the restaurant that I cared about. She didn’t know how to read or write but by God, she could cook and tell a story. Her memory was amazing. She was seventy-two and would tell me stories of how things used to be before civil rights and women’s equality. She was working just to have someone to talk to, I think. And then I realized upon my reflections of the day exactly how I would figure out who my biological mother was.

“Daddy, do you think tomorrow instead of working at the airport, I could go to work with you at the storage units?”

“Sure. But she’s not going to just magically appear tomorrow. You know that, right?”

“Yes, Daddy. I just want to be with you, tomorrow.”
He smiled and knew I was up to something. He stood from the dining room table and pulled his flannel shirt from the back of the chair and inserted one arm at a time, buttoning the cuffs as he went. “Be up and ready at 9 a.m., okay?”

“Yep.” He looked pleased that I was excited and went outside to feed our dog Charlie.

By noon the next day I had exactly what I needed. When my father went to lunch with his friend Billy from high school, I photocopied the list of all of the tenants in the complex and began marking out all of the names of the male tenants on the list. I was left with a list of female tenants: Jill Sanders, Hannah Mitchell, Melissa Jones, Vinny Hatfield, and Nancy Roe.

By 3 o’clock in the afternoon, I was at the airport and begging Gladys to tell me everything she knew about the women on my list.

“I just need someone to help me, Gladys. Please.”

“Girl, it just isn’t my place to tell you.”

“Do you know who my mother was?”

“No. But you’re gonna have lots of reasons to think all them women on that list is your momma and it’s gonna drive you crazy. You ever heard of how bad luck it is to for a bird to fly into your house? People say it means somebody’s gonna drop dead. You let stories in your head and they gonna fly around in your brain and bounce off the walls and can’t get out. You gonna kill your own soul lettin stories in that you can’t take back. Be happy with the momma The Good Lord gave ya.”
Her once black hair turned silver grey and was pinned in a tight bun on top of her head. She always wore the black apron with blue-tailed roosters on the front. And her eyes were crystal blue behind thick lenses. She was all put together like everybody’s grandma should be, except for the broken heart tattoo on the bend of her hand between her index finger and thumb.

“Gladys? What if I were your daughter and I’d forgiven you for anything you ever did wrong and you’d never met me? Would you want to meet me?”

“I reckon I would.” She smiled faintly and brushed away the straggling hairs that tickling her forehead.

“Then please tell me. I don’t care what story it is and who you heard it from, I’m asking for anything.”

“You got your mind all sigoggled and them birds are already in there, huh?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You gotta promise me that whatever you find out, you can weed through it and figure out what to keep and what to toss. Ain’t no use in keeping things you can’t help or change. You know that, right?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“All right then. Get a pen.”

That was the day I started writing all of the stories, one by one. I tried to write them exactly how Gladys told them to me, although hearing them being told and writing them are two very different things. I tried sometimes to imagine myself as them—to
understand why I was given away. But the truth is, one of these women is my mother and I need to hear it from her.
At sunrise on the Southern Ohio riverbank you can watch spirits dance off the water. Some think the fog is merely there because it’s morning, but Keith Sanders went there because he believed it’s where the ghosts of men without jobs hovered, trying to figure out how to support their families.

He’d brought a newspaper to sit on so the seat of his pants wouldn’t be wet from the morning dew. His wife had ironed his periwinkle-blue work shirt the night before, the one that proudly displayed his name in a white rectangle on his chest. His red and white Igloo lunch cooler was full of turkey sandwiches and a love note from his six-year-old daughter Lilly. His tan leather steel-toed boots were worn to the last of their soles. After fifteen years at the bottling factory he was told he was no longer needed. He hadn’t had the heart to tell his wife Jill yet, so he set the alarm for its usual time and went to the riverbank to think.

He sat on the riverbank silently, waiting for the sky to lift and reveal citrus shaded clouds. Soon the hills became visible and thousands of trees stood like guards surrounding the water. His palms pressed to his forehead, he fought to hear his dead father’s voice. He wanted an answer as to what he was supposed to do. There were men all over the county who had been waiting for years for something decent and were still pushing a broom and scrubbing toilets on nightshift at local restaurants. The only other option he could think of was to partner up with his friend Jimmy and pray he didn’t get caught.
Jimmy had begun a home-grown business. He owned several acres behind his house in McDermott that were mainly hillside and built a dog pen that surrounded his investment. In the hills of Appalachia, dogs were the cheapest home security a man could get. Dogs trained from puppies to protect pot were known to tear off limbs. Jimmy had made more money selling pot in five years than he did at the bottling plant in ten. When people asked how things were going, he would always let his wife Molly have all the credit. “She’s workin’ down at the Wal-mart now. Who’m I to tell her she can’t work? Shit, women get jobs easier than men now, so I say g’on, momma.” It always seemed to get a chuckle, but everyone knew Molly’s minimum wage job wasn’t paying their house payment and keeping their kids in Nike shoes. It’s just that no one told, because the majority of people understood it was that or the welfare line. “Keith, when you’re ready to trade your old life in for a new one, get yourself a dog, and call me,” he told Keith. Keith had never thought about it until now.

Keith hated to think about the predicament his family would be in if he got caught. He couldn’t afford to go to jail and have charges permanently on his record; he’d never get hired again once the economy picked back up. But he also couldn’t spend one more night watching his wife and daughter suffer through yet another version of Hamburger Helper and Kool-Aid. They didn’t mind waiting on pay day, but pay day wasn’t going to come this time.

Keith got up and patted out the wrinkles in his clothes. He folded the newspaper and put it in his back pocket, then picked up his lunch box. With one last glance at the
very river that had shipped so many dreams away, he hung his head and begged, please, someone… tell me what to do.

On his way back up the muddy bank, Keith noticed a woman who had not been on the corner of the bridge before daybreak. The corner of the bridge linking Ohio and Kentucky was the local hotspot for beggars and peddlers. It had more traffic than most of the corners in the city. Someone was always there and the only thing that changed was what they were trying to give away or asking for. The day before yesterday it was a man with a homemade guitar and a veteran jacket singing “Free Bird” and asking for cigarettes. This woman appeared at first to be a beggar holding a sign asking for money. But the closer Keith got, he saw the brown cardboard sign read “FREE PUPPIES” in red marker. The woman wore a faded denim shirt that was easily three sizes too big. She had stringy black and silver hair that floated past her shoulders and next to her feet were three fuzzy brown puppies all tangled up in laundry line rope. The woman smiled at Keith, inviting him to come and look. The dogs were calm and sleeping on the ground between the woman’s feet until he began to speak.

“What kind of dogs are these, ma’am?” he asked.

Just as he spoke, one of the puppies woke and began barking and pulling at the line, waking the others.

“I’m afraid they’re a mix of just about everything, but they’re gonna make good watch dogs. You can’t get hardly nothin’ past that little fat one right there. We call him Bear.” The woman pointed at the dog that had barked at Keith and bent down to pick him up. “He’s good with young’uns too, likes to play fetch.”
He stared at the dog’s deep brown eyes and hesitated making a decision. Regardless of whether he wanted to or not, he had to go home with a way to make things better.

“All right then. I guess I’ll take him home,” Keith said.

The woman untied the laundry line from Bear’s collar and handed him to Keith. Keith held the puppy under his right arm, and listened to it grunt every time he took a step. “Damn. Let’s hope you don’t eat pot, dog. ‘Cause it looks like you eat everything else.”

Keith put the dog up in the truck seat and called Jimmy. It rang twice before Jimmy picked up.

“What’s up, buddy?” Jimmy asked.

“I got a dog,” Keith said.

The rest of the conversation went just as he assumed it would. Jimmy told him to stop by on the way home. Keith hid the plants in a black garbage bag behind the seat of the truck. He instantly spotted every highway patrolman and deputy on his way home. His temperature rose and he’d begin to sweat at the thought of an officer pulling up behind him. One sheriff did pull behind him, and the thirty seconds it took to find a driveway to pull off on felt like an hour. His hands shook and he repeatedly peered through the rearview mirror. Bear caught onto the tension and barked loud enough to rattle the windows and turn Keith’s eardrums into hollow tunnels. He turned in circles in the seat and jumped up and down. Finally Keith pulled over. The dog kept barking and the Sherriff drove passed.
“Shut up, dog! Jesus Christ!” Keith yelled, and smacked the dog on its head. He sat in his pickup truck in a stranger’s driveway until he could regain composure, taking deep breaths and resting his head on the seat while watching the dog hunker on the floorboard. When an older lady came out the door of the house, he put the truck in reverse and started off again.

Keith pulled into his driveway meeting eyes with his wife who was rocking back and forth on the porch swing of their daisy colored double-wide trailer. Lilly sat on the sidewalk drawing a hopscotch board with pink chalk and brushing her wild auburn curls from her eyes. She looked up from the sidewalk at the sound of her father’s rusted ’84 Ford. She tugged at her Little Mermaid nightgown pinned underneath her to let her stand up.

“You’re home early, Baby.” Jill called out to him, pinning her wet blonde hair to the back of her head. Keith smiled and walked from the driver side of the truck to the passenger’s and opened the truck door. Bear jumped from the truck into the yard and hiked his leg on Jill’s tulips.

“A puppy! Daddy, you got me a puppy! He’s so fat!” Lilly squealed and ran to Bear.

“Oh no,” Jill said. “Where on earth did ya get him?”

“Ha. Well, he was free, and I found him on my way home.”

“So Lilly wore you down, I guess. What happened to the firm stand we were taking on the No Dogs Allowed rule?” Jill asked. She wrapped her arms around Keith’s
waist and put her hands in his back pockets. “I missed you this morning,” she added while lightly kissing his cheek.

Keith kissed her forehead and rested his face in her hair, breathing the apple-scented shampoo. He held her to his chest, knowing she’d be upset once he started talking.

“I gotta tell ya some things, starting with why there’s a dog,” Keith whispered. Jill pulled back from him and looked into his dark blue eyes. “Sounds serious. Turns out that I have somethin’ to tell you, too.”

“It is. Let’s go inside.” He patted her shoulders and pulled away. “Let’s get the dog, and I have somethin’ else I gotta get out of the truck.”

“Lilly? Lilly? Where’d ya go baby?” Jill asked. Her eyes scanned the yard.

“I’m in here, Mommy,” Lilly giggled. She scuffed through the bushes holding Bear with both hands and struggled to keep hold while he wiggled and yapped.

“Let’s go inside and find him a blanket. Mommy and Daddy need to talk.”

Lilly headed up the sidewalk toting the dog. Jill walked behind her, occasionally looking back at Keith struggling to pull a black garbage bag from the back of the truck seat. Keith broke it loose and walked to the door.

His initial conversation starter of I lost my job but I’m gonna grow pot with Jimmy didn’t go over well. Jill had a lot to say about it. It was followed quickly by You don’t even know how to grow pot! You smoked it what, once in high school? Knowing it was going to be a long night, Keith sat at the kitchen table they had prayed at over many meals.
“It’s not that you lost your job and didn’t tell me, it’s that you brought home drugs.” Jill stood with one arm resting on her stomach. Lilly lay on the couch upside down, the dog jumping from the floor into her hair.

“What is it that you want me to do, Jill? What choices do I have?”

“We’d find somethin’. I can work. Jimmy’s wife works.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you to work, it’s that it won’t be enough. My job brought home what three minimum wage jobs brought, Jill. There is nothing else.”

Jill lifted her hands and buried her face in them.

“You tell me what to do and I’ll do it. This is the only thing I know to do. I need to be able to take care of my own, Jill. It’s what I was taught to do.”

Jill uncovered her eyes, and stared back into the living room where Lilly had let out a scream. Bear was pulling backward with a mouthful of Lilly’s hair in a tug of war.

“Let go, Bear! Mommy! It’s eating me!” Lilly cried.

“I’ll tell ya what to do, Keith,” she yelled, and pointed into the living room. “Go get the damn piss bag that’s devouring your daughter and make it a bed outside, and you might wanna think about making you one out there, too.”

Keith slept in the camper parked beside the garage for two nights. He had nowhere to be and nothing to do but think. Jill barely spoke to him but to pass the phone to him when someone called to say they were sorry to hear the news about the plant going under. Each offered condolences, but no jobs, no real ideas. With each phone call he became more embarrassed that the only thing he’d accomplished was emptying a case.
of beer and a bottle of bourbon, and chucking the bottles side by side next to the firepit, letting them clink. Lilly had brought him sandwiches around lunch time each day and said Thanks for taking care of my dog, Daddy. He wanted to tell her that he was just trying to take care of her, too, but Jill hurried her to come back inside. Keith knew Jill hated when he drank because he spoke his mind without thinking. It’s why he didn’t do either often. Words were hard to take back, but that didn’t mean he never tried.

On the third evening it was cold. He sat slumped in a metal lawn chair with a baseball cap lowered over blood shot eyes and stared at the dog he’d tied up. With every hour that passed, he regretted bringing it home. He’d pulled an empty garbage can up to a tree and buried his daughter’s old Care Bears comforter in the back of it for the dog to sleep on. The dog had a better bed than he did. It pulled at the line and barked to be loose, yelping and whining. Bear was the worst he’d been for days. He would occasionally stop barking long enough to lap up a drink of water and cough, then start again.

“Shut up, dog! Please, just shut the hell up,” he shouted.

The dog barked back.

“Shut up! Jesus Christ! We don’t even want ya now.”

The dog barked and begged.

“What the hell’s going on out there?” Jill called out. She poked her head half way out the screen door.

“Nothin’. Go back in the house where you belong,” Keith said, rising from his chair to face her.
“What did you just say to me?” Jill asked. She stepped out the door onto the porch, and crossed her arms in front of her.

“I said, go back in the house where you belong! That’s your job, this is mine. Remember? You made that clear several days ago.”

“Oh, really?” Jill took a step forward. Keith stepped closer to her, trying to intimidate her back inside. He beat the ground as he walked and she stood firm until he reached the bottom step of the porch. Jumping three steps to land on the top one, he gained footing and grabbed the handle of the screen door. Jill tried to hold it shut from the inside.

“Open the damn door, Jill!” Keith yanked and pulled on the door, causing Jill to lose her footing on the other side. The door swung open and Keith stepped over her to get in.

“This is my house too, and if I wanna come in, I’ll come in!”

Jill sat on the linoleum and listened to the dog barking outside. She pulled herself up and pushed Keith out of her way. “What are you gonna do with the fuckin’ pot, Keith?” Jill asked.

“I don’t want it in this house. I don’t want people comin’ here to buy it and I don’t want people comin’ here to steal it. And I don’t want you in here drunk and scary. You are not this man. We have a six-year-old daughter for God’s sake.”

Keith was beginning to feel the heat in his face and the strain in his eyes. His hands shook. He noticed Lilly out of the corner of his eye run with a flashlight and cheese crackers. His heart sank at the thought that they were scared of him.
“I won’t let anyone hurt you, Jill.”

“Really, Keith? How are you gonna do that, when the damned dog doesn’t even know what to bark at? The thing is gonna keep us up all night barking at mosquitoes! And if you get caught, you know what that means? It means I’m raisin’ Lilly by myself,” she said, while counting reasons on her fingers. “We’re gonna lose the house and not have anywhere to live, and you’re gonna be in jail and not able to get another job, ‘cause you’ll be a criminal,” she added, throwing her hands in the air. “This is the way it starts, Keith. People think they can just sell pot until they see what kind of money comes in with pills. Then the shit just keeps escalatin’ until it’s out of control.” He refused to look at her.

Voice cracking, she said, “Your Daddy would be ashamed!”

Keith gritted his teeth and pointed his finger at her, growling at her low blow. He knew she was right, but it felt like gasoline had been poured on the last ounce of integrity he had left and set ablaze. “Fine, you want me to take it all back, that’s fine. I can do that. I’ve done it before.” He grabbed the black garbage bag from beside the couch and his shotgun from behind the door.

“What are you doing, Keith? Keith!” Jill screamed as she tugged at his wrist to hold him back. The dog barked louder, competing with their screaming, and she knew what the shot gun was for.
“You’re beautiful,” my sister Susan whispers. I’m in her styling chair.

“I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“Your hair is a golden blonde, just like the straw we used to feed the horses.”

“In the summer or the winter?”

“In the summer, in the afternoon, right before Momma would call us in for lunch.”

“I want it to be red. Red like the early leaves that fell right before the nights turned cold.”

“I can do that, but are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I hear the others in the beauty shop: there are two women and a small boy to my right, about twenty-five feet from me. Susan’s business partner is to her left, cutting a man’s hair. He is older with a deep voice and talks about how no one will ever sing a song like Bob Dylan did. I agree, but I say nothing.

My sister pulls the rubber band from my three-day-old ponytail and runs her hand up the back of my skull and shakes the curls down. She spares me the usual talk about how ponytails point to depression. Then she takes my hand to lead me to the shampoo bowl. I scoot down until my butt feels like it’s sliding, and my neck rests on the lip of the bowl. The water is warm. Droplets land on my forehead and cheeks.

My sister can make anyone beautiful with two hours and some bleach, so she tells me. She’s thin but curvy. She’s beautiful, I know, because of the way men talk with her.
They listen to what she’s saying, then comment back using the same words she did. Men talk at me, not to me. And when I hug her she has no rolls of skin on her sides between her ribs and waist. My arms rest comfortably on her hips while she hugs me tighter than I assume she hugs everyone else. She loves me but she feels guilty so she overcompensates.

We were both children in a field of horses that day. We were trying to bottle magic by petting horses as they ran by. She touched the hind leg of a brown and white paint colt. It tried to kick her and it got me instead in the back of the head with a single wild leg. I was old enough to have seen what the world looks like, but too young to have memorized it.

Susan wraps a towel around my hair and helps me sit up. I hold the towel and she walks me back to the chair. I sit up straight while she is tugging and combing.

Tomorrow’s my first day back to work around people and the season-starter bonfire is tonight. The Scioto County (SciCo) fair hosts the only fun things to do in the county during late summer and early fall and I’m the Lemonade Shake-up Queen. I can slice the lemons with a piece of dental floss, just pull it tight enough and it will cut straight through. It takes two and a half lemons and one cup of sugar to make a medium shake-up. It’s easy. Easy enough for a blind girl to do, is what they figure. The only problem I have with running the trailer is that someone else has to take the money. I’ve been there for five years now and people know I’m blind so sometimes kids stiff me on money. They tell me they are giving me a ten, and I give them $6.01 in change from the marked drawers, when they really only gave me a dollar. So now someone works with
me constantly. But what I’m really excited about is being with Sam—or Omaha Steak
Sam, in carnival talk. He is a traveling carnie who has a wife in Mississippi, but likes me.

“He sells twenty Ribeyes for twenty-four dollars,” I told my sister last year, when
I was excited to tell her that I met him. “When men and women ask if they are really
Ribeye steaks he says, “They’re technically flanks, but a tender piece of meat is still good
meat. Am I right? It gets ‘em every time.” She wasn’t impressed. I didn’t tell her that he
doesn’t mind that I am blind, and I don’t mind that he’s probably not the best at screwing.
Or that he drinks at the bonfires every night and then takes my hand from Mary when
she’s leading me out of camp.

On the Wednesday night of the first week I met him, I walked behind him, my
hand in his, and felt his wedding ring between my fingers and imagined that I gave it to
him. Then we went in the steak trailer and he undressed me. There was no leading up to
anything. He didn’t ask if I had ever, and I didn’t offer to tell him. He didn’t touch me
like I was glass on a shelf. He wasn’t afraid to knock me off balance. He didn’t announce
where he was going to put his hands. He just did it. And it was real and to him I was any
other girl other than the blind girl that made lemonade.

But the last three summers he’s drunk too much. When we are together, he curses
and fumbles with his pants. He pushes his body up against mine a lot, while he pants hot
breaths on my neck and then decides to quit. He will lie beside me, though, and let me
hold his hand. And he will tell me about all the places he’s been and what color the skies
are in the morning. And after a while, he gets dressed and then walks me to the edge of
my trailer where I sleep on a cot until morning just so I don’t miss the moments where I feel real. I wait all year for them.

My sister doesn’t approve of me even talking to him, so I say nothing. I can’t tell her any of this. I don’t want to tell her I want red hair because Sam says I would look good as a redhead. She is blow-drying my hair so I know I’m almost done.

Mary told me that he has tattoos all up and down his forearms of carnival flags and clowns that are bright blues, reds, and yellows, like the color wheel we saw in kindergarten. Pictures in his skin. And it sounds amazing, like a permanent version of the marker art on my hands that I used to get in trouble for when I was a child. He has dark brown hair, like chocolate, she says, and it touches his shoulders. He wears tank-tops a lot and dirty blue-jeans, she said. I feel warm curls falling slowly around my face.

“You know, Hannah,” Susan says, “I’ve heard about this alligator-wrestlin’ Tom guy that works in the Taco booth. Do they ever let him do shows? I think that would be fun to see.”

“Nah. Not really.”

I want to tell my sister that Taco Tom can’t feel anything in his right arm from his elbow down because an alligator bit down on his arm and held on for three hours until he passed out. Sam had an honest-to-God freak show in New Orleans before they became illegal in 2007 and Tom was one of his freaks. In the show Tom used to let men hit his arm with a hammer full-force and felt nothing. Men would pay to do it. Last year he put his thumb in the corn dog deep fryer to win twenty bucks. He didn’t say a peep. But the man that bet him twenty dollars vomited on the metal steps of my trailer. Sam had a
bearded lady, twins that were connected by their intestines and faced each other constantly, and a man with both sets of genitals. I don’t tell her this because I know that she’ll think I don’t need to be there around those types of people. But I do, and even though she’s trying to take interest in what I like, she’ll never understand why I feel more alive around them than anywhere else.

“You’re done,” she says, while fluffing my hair upward.

“And? How does it look?”

“You are beautiful.”

“You say that every time, though.”

“It’s true. It looks natural. It suits you.”

“Thank you for doing it.” I shift in my chair, ready for her to take off the cape.

“Mary is here. She’s been outside texting for about ten minutes now. I’ll motion for her.” I feel the curls with my fingertips, sculpted into place and slightly crunchy, but not heavy. The curls bounce when I move. My hair smells like the peach groves in Georgia on our family vacation 10 years ago. Susan hands me my rubber-band and I slide it onto my wrist.

“I like your hombre, Mary. Did you do it?” Susan says.


“Thanks. I hear it looks natural.” I get out of my seat and stand still until she locks arms with me. I push the glasses back up to the bridge of my nose.
Susan hugs me goodbye, since I won’t see her for a week and tells my cousin Mary to not let me get into trouble. The assumption that I might end up in trouble comes from the fact that my parents home-schooled me after the accident. They were so scared of people pointing and laughing or taking advantage of me, that they just kept me in a bubble for ten years. Even now, I spend every day of my adult life calling people from home about their credit card bills being overdue just so I don’t have to go into the real world without someone. This is not my choice. It’s my family’s—even though I’m twenty-one years old. When my uncle asked if I wanted to help with his lemonade stand at the fair several years ago, it was like life was saying, “I dealt you a shitty hand. My apologies. Have fun one week a year and try to learn how to socialize.” I don’t think they would trust the situation, though, if Mary wasn’t so willing to help me.

In the truck, Mary tells me the latest. “You promise you won’t cry?” She lowers her voice in the cab of the truck. I don’t want to promise anything but she won’t tell me if I don’t.

“I promise.”

“He brought his wife this time.”

“His wife?” I grip the handle of the truck door.

“Yes. Apparently they sold everything and brought what would fit in a storage unit until after the fair, then he’s taking over his grandparents’ farm in Minford. Apparently he spent summers there as a child with them until he turned nineteen. Taco Tom says Sam’s not happy about it, but he had to.”

“Have you seen her?” I pick at a hangnail on my thumb.
“His wife?”

“Yes. What does she look like?”

We hit a bump in the road and I’m sent forward. Her shocks are terrible.

“She’s fat. She has bright red hair, like a stop sign. Looks cheap and slutty. And she talks really loud. She has bright tattoos, too. And her skin is white, like a doll’s, and she wears bright make-up.”

“She has red hair?” I want to yank my hair out one strand at a time. Instead, I wrap it up and pin it into a ponytail, trying to hide the giant curls.

“I’m really sorry, Hannah. But Tom says that he’ll tell them to not come to the bonfire tonight. He doesn’t want your feelings to be hurt.”

“Taco Tom. Like anyone ever listens to what he says.”

“He’s actually really nice, Mary.”

“Well, you tell him that they should go to the bonfire and it doesn’t bother me a bit. Tell him I have a new boyfriend from this past spring,” I say. “No, don’t. Not the last part.”

We make it to camp and the old familiar sounds creep in my ears. The dings from the games as they are being tested, the pops of the balloons that don’t make it to the dart boards, and the water gushing from point and spray races. The dirt from the driveway coats the inside of my nostrils and I hear the livestock in the barns. The horses are neighing and I keep walking, holding onto the edge of Mary’s sweatshirt. I need a dog to lead me places so that Mary doesn’t have to do this, but I lost trust in animals a long time ago. The carousel begins to play the same music as my wind-up jewelry box. Mary leaves
me at the lemonade trailer where the smell of citrus and sticky-sweet sugar draws mosquitos in the night. I slice lemons for the next day in order to be ahead of schedule and am reminded of what the lemon juice feels like in the hangnails on my fingers. It burns like acid and my fingers shrivel like there is too much skin for the bones in my hands. I wash the acid from my hands, and wait for the air to turn cold and for Mary to come and get me.

I sit at the bonfire with my hair tucked underneath the hoodie of my sweatshirt. I imagine what I must look like to the rest of them. Like a bank robber trying to stay incognito when in actuality I stand out the most. I hear his wife talking. It’s the only voice I don’t recognize.

“And then Sam says to Tom, ‘Don’t you know you can’t keep an alligator in a storage unit?’” She giggles like a school girl. Others laugh, but I don’t hear Sam. Even Mary laughs. There he is. I recognize his voice. I would recognize it anywhere. He doesn’t sound happy. He sounds sorry, like the first time he had to walk me back to the trailer after we didn’t do it. He’s embarrassed about something. I feel the heat from the fire on my face and now only my fingers are cold. Bottles clink against each other.

My friends actually like her and for the first time I wonder if she knows about me, and if she doesn’t, I wonder who, if anyone, will tell her about us.

“Well, needless to say, Tom will find out whether or not he’s allowed to have an alligator and a blue plastic pool in there for four weeks once he undoes the lock and
moves him in broad daylight.” She’s winning them over one by one. They laugh hysterically and I wince.

I uncross my arms and try to stand up slowly. The laughter dies. Then I smell the deep leather cologne and I know he’s beside me.

“Hannah,” he says, and touches my arm.

“Yes?” I say. I move away from his touch.

“Did you have a good summer?”

“I did. Thank you.”

He pats my head and my hoodie falls behind my new red hair.

“I wish I could have let you know we were moving here,” he says. Dirt scoots with patterned feet and another hand touches my arm but it is more firm and suddenly I smell a rose bush.

“Finally. I get to meet Blind Hannah! How are you?”

*Blind Hannah. Blind Hannah? That’s what he told her my name was?*

“Nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard great things,” is what I say, and Mary takes my hand and I follow behind her.

Halfway down the dirt driveway to the trailer I give in. “Maybe I should just call Susan to come and get me. I don’t belong here.”

Mary holds my hand tighter and says, “I’d call her if I thought that’s really what you want to do. But it’s not. Don’t let this take away your freedom.”

“I’m blind and he calls me Blind Hannah.”
“Hannah, you can wrestle with it all you want, but I’m not going to let you
wallow in it.” She places my hand on the trailer door. “You have to learn to get back up.”

I go in the trailer and lie down on the cot, not even changing clothes first. For the
first time in ten years I cry about being blind and all the things I don’t see.

The next morning Mary leads me to the Shake-up trailer and for once I am
thankful that my eyes are covered with sunglasses. They are puffy and sore. I didn’t sleep
at all.

“Just remember, if he comes by, tell Tom to tell him to go to hell. Sam doesn’t
deserve to talk to you. You make him go through me,” Mary says.

“Yes. Okay. Wait. Tom?”

“Yes, Tom is working with you today.”

“His friend Taco Tom?”

“Yes.”

“Why him? Why today?”

“It’s gonna be okay, Hannah. You don’t have to talk to him. Apparently the Taco
trailer shipment did not come in and he has volunteered to be with you today.”

“What are we going to do for twelve hours?”

“You’ll be fine. I just have to collect the rental fee from all the other trailers, then
I’ll be back. See you in a bit.” She lets go of my hand and I’m standing in front of the
trailer door. I hear Tom clear his voice.

“I put my hand out to ya, Hannah. You can take it and I’ll help ya in.”
“I’m fine, thanks.” I grasp the cold metal door and feel my way in. I can’t fathom the thought of touching his hand after he’s deep fried his fingers and hammered them for money. I’m sure that they are mutilated and scabby. Plus, I just don’t need his hand.

“How are you this morning?”

“Alive.”

“That’s better than not alive, I suppose.”

“Is it? I hoist a box of lemons onto the counter and place them to the right of me for easy grabbing.

“Wow. You wish you were dead, huh?”

“No, Tom. I just wish I weren’t here.”

Tom laughs and then walks toward me. He smells different than what he normally does. Last season, he smelled like waxy apples of the morning from his cheap shampoo. Mid-day he smelled like burrito salsa and onions. By the evening I could smell his oily beard from twenty feet away. He walked with us a lot, never saying much.

“So, you are upset that Sam brought Lisa, right?”

“No.”

“Then why are ya so upset? I’ve never seen you mad a day in your life.”

“Yes. Yes, I’m mad. But it’s fine. It’s not like he can move and not bring his wife, right?”

“True.”

“I don’t have a right to be mad. She should be mad.”

“She doesn’t care.”
I am silenced. He must have had many women. Why am I surprised?

I wait on five customers and can’t speak to Tom in a coherent sentence until noon. 

“I should have known. But I’m okay,” I say.

“I just didn’t want you to be scared, ya know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I know a little somethin about being scared, and she’s no gator.” I hear his smile in his elevated voice. I laugh, but in my mind she looks like one.

“I’m gonna go get lunch. Would you like somethin’?”

“No. I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

I walk my way around the trailer feeling along the counter and tapping my foot slightly. At the sink I feel where I took a staple from the lemon crate and carved Sam~N~Hannah into the marble top. Mary said it wasn’t visible, but I can still feel it. I wash lemons until I hear someone coming.

“Well, I bought ya French fries.” Tom jumps up the stairs and into the trailer.

“I don’t really like French fries,” I say.

“But they’re crispy and light brown, like wheat fields.

“How did you…?”

“I asked Mary about ya,” he says. “I wanted to know how you see things.”

“I don’t see anything. But I will eat the fries.” A part of me wanted to be mad that Mary had told him things but wheat-brown fries were definitely crispy and yummy.
“Tom, is it true that alligator held on to your arm for three hours and wouldn’t let go and you wouldn’t let them kill it?”

“It’s true.”

“How did you not bleed to death?”

“I took my belt off and made a tourniquet around my bicep.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“So why wouldn’t you let that gator be shot?”

Tom took a moment thinking and sighed. Maybe no one had ever asked him that question before. Surely they had. He was in the freak show. People ask questions.

“He didn’t want to eat me. He was mad. I was mad, too. I thought we’d just be mad until it killed one or both of us.”

I didn’t really know what to say. Luckily I had a customer during the thick awkward fog.

“Can I get a medium Shake-up?” It was a small boy asking, and he snickered when he put his hand to the counter. “Are you the blind girl?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said, “It’s $3.99”

He waved the money in front of me and I could feel the air flow off of it. He laughed again, and I felt Tom exit the trailer.

“Hey!” the boy yelled and took off running.

Tom came back in. “He didn’t need the Shake-up, after all.”

“You don’t have to protect me, Tom. I can do my job.”
“That’s fine, but that kid was bein’ an asshole.

“You’re being an asshole.”

“Why am I an asshole?”

“Because you can’t let me do what I do without thinking your big alligator wrestlin’ arms need to chase off kids. Just let me be.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“I don’t need you to help me. Yes, kids come here to see me, like a freak. You should be used to it. Yes, your friend collected me like a freak, you should also be used to that. Hurry Tom, deep-fry your finger and let’s give him one hell of a show!”

Tom walked out of the trailer. I heard him go out to the yard and stop. He stood, whether looking at me or not, I didn’t know. But he stood for a moment and then began walking again. About five minutes later, Mary came to the trailer. She didn’t say anything. Just came in and started slicing lemons.

“I shouldn’t have been so mean.”

“Well…”

“No, I shouldn’t have been. Just because I feel like a freak doesn’t mean I should remind him of what he used to do.”

“He can feel things now, ya know?”

“I’m sure he could always feel things, Mary.”

“No, I mean, he sold all of his belongings and had a surgery.”

“A surgery?”
“Yeah. He had nerve-endings from his toes put in his fingertips and they gave him new fingertips. He can feel things. So I wouldn’t make the deep-fryer jokes anymore.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to understand why that wasn’t the first thing he told me.

SciCo fair goers were wobbling out of the parking lot, full of grease and dust. In the trailer lot, the bonfire was being lit to end the first day and people were counting their money drawers. The zooming of the rides had stopped and screaming children were being carried out covered in sticky cotton candy. A deep manure musk washed through the air from the barn displays. The dinging of the game booths had finally quit, and the resident clown was no longer saying “Step on up, step right up!” The lights were being powered down, I heard the breakers being pulled. I never got to see the lights in my childhood, but my sister told me they were like Christmas strung through the sky. I remember Christmas lights, like balls of fire on chord. The last Christmas I was able to see, I remember standing out in the snow bundled up and telling my father when the lights looked even on both sides of the porch. It had to be perfect for my mother, otherwise she would have sent back out to try again. From a distance the lights looked like stars perched in the gutters. They would probably look smaller to me now that I am an adult. Everything is smaller and less perfected. Arguments. Dreams. Horses.

Caramel apples fill the air.

“What ya goin’ to the bonfire, Hannah?”

“Oh, Geez! You scared me to death!”

“Sorry. I thought maybe you heard me walking.”
“I was caught up in remembering what Christmas lights look like, Tom.”

“Christmas lights?”

“Yes, that’s the way my sister describes the lights here.”

“Oh. I see them as freak show lights. Glaring at your eyes and demanding attention. I probably always will.” He put the box of lemons down to the floor, and scooted them under the counter.

“Thanks for helping me. I’m really sorry. About earlier.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s really not.”

“Yeah it is. I knew you were upset and I kept pushing ya, trying to talk it out.”

We left the trailer and I stood in front of the door.

“Tom?” I put my arm out, waving it in the air, hoping to find his arm.

“I’m here.”

“You’re not an asshole.”

“How come you didn’t tell me that earlier?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you had an operation on your hand?”

“Because I wanted to wait until I could show you somethin’.”

“Show me what?”

He placed my hand in his and traced the lines in my palm with his fingertip.

“That I feel you.” His hand shook waiting for me to say something, so I found his shoulders and held him, letting my temple rest against the bandana on his head that I never knew was there.
It wasn’t unusual for a customer to stare at her own feet in a shoe store for a period of time, but Jill couldn’t help but pay attention to the woman trying on sandals. Usually, this sort of woman stayed in the tennis shoes aisle and tried on several athletic shoes hoping for a new trendy color to go along with her denim skirt and full length blouse. But this patron wore one tennis shoe and one gold-strapped occasion shoe for ten minutes. She twisted her foot in the mirror sideways then forward again, raising her skirt just a little past her ankle. Then she walked down the aisle of shoes once again, watching her feet as she walked. On the third trip back, Jill wondered if maybe she needed a different size.

“Do you need any help, Miss?”

Startled, the woman dropped the handful of skirt she was holding up. She straightened her skirt by patting it and touched the collar of her shirt with her fingertips. “No, I don’t think so. Thank you, though.”

“Are you sure? They look beautiful. Maybe you need a half-size smaller?” Jill tilted her head slightly to the left, trying to meet her gaze.

“Oh I’m not serious about buying them. They’re not what I’m used to. It just amused me to try them on.” She quickly sat on the edge of the wooden bench and began unbuckling the ankle strap.

“That’s fine, you can try on whatever you like. It’s fun to try new things.” Jill watched as the woman stood up fully to push stray hairs from the back of her neck back into her tight bun. The sandal rested under her foot, unstrapped but still in place. She sat
still staring at the shoe, moving her head side to side to see it from every angle. Then she took it off quickly and put it back in the box, glancing again at the price tag.

“Well, I’ll just be at the register if you need anything. Let me know if I can help.” Jill put her freshly manicured hands into the pockets of her khaki work-pants and turned toward the counter. She could hear the laughter from the playground in the center of the mall. It burst through the doorway on occasion, reminding her that at least someone was having fun while she was working. If she stood at the counter she could see “Breakfast land,” the playground built to look like oversized breakfast food, provided by a local hospital to get kids to think about the importance of breakfast. She was sure they got the message while each of them swung from the rubber banana monkey bars. It made her nervous to watch the kids play, though. They were so daring and unknowing. None of them were scared to jump off the giant biscuits onto the floor. They made choices quick without knowing the consequences.

She walked to the jewelry display and moved a pair of misplaced earrings to the clearance section of the rack. She spun the rack clockwise one turn and noticed a six pack of earrings missing a pair. Damn thievin’ teenagers. She was forever cleaning up the messes they left. Shoes out of the boxes just left lying in the floor of aisles. One time she found a beautiful melon-colored scarf stuck in a purse with bedazzled skull and crossbones on it. How those two items went together, she’d never know. But someone had been determined to make it work, then abandoned the idea. Or got scared of getting caught. What if the woman in the next aisle over is scared of getting caught? Scared of getting caught showing her toes? What about her heel? Perhaps the mere sight of a toe
could entice a man to want sex? Jill giggled. She imagined clean cut men with Bibles under their arms storming the shoe store and pointing at the woman with the sandal on and them raising their holy-canter fists in the air, charging her with indecent exposure while she stood blushing and denying the scandalous behavior. Perhaps they’d make her carry logs on her back draped in athletic shoes by their shoe strings or even paint a big toe on her clothing and force her to wear it all around town, signaling that she had shown her toes publicly. The doorbell dinged.

“It’s a great afternoon at Payless; can I help you find something?” Jill rolled it off her tongue so often that she did it instinctively now. She put the last pair of misplaced earrings in their correct spot and turned to face the customer.

“I’m just looking,” the determined young woman said, pushing a stroller full of twin toddlers sniffing and shaking from having mental breakdowns from what Jill assumed was probably having to leave the play area. Jill saw it often. Screaming fits and stomping feet, kids telling parents when they wanted to leave and then parents dragging them away. Swollen red eyes were normal. Who would want to stop jumping on a bacon trampoline? Or decide one more time down the French toast slide was enough? There was never a happy child at the giant waffle, retrieving his or her shoes from a square.

Jill touched the screen of her computer to see the time. 4:37 p.m. She winked one eye and held it shut trying to calculate the exact number of minutes left until her shift was up at 6. Two, no, one hour and..twenty-three minutes left. Thank God. It was Sunday and the mall closed at 6 p.m. An early night for a not-so-religious gal. Still, her appreciation for the holy day was valid. Jill peered out the window and watched a boy climb to the top
of the pancakes and shove down other children trying to make their way to the top of the mountain.

“I’ll take all three of these,” the denim-skirted woman said with confidence. On the counter were the gold sandals she’d looked at for so long, along with another identical pair in silver, and an empty box of the same style. She pointed to her feet. “I’m wearing the third pair.” She stepped back from the counter to show that she was wearing a black pair and smiled as she teetered on her heel, lifting her toes to wiggle them.

“Wonderful. They look lovely.” Even though she was genuinely shocked at the woman’s decision to buy the shoes, she respected her even more for it. She rang up the boxes one by one. “Can I interest you in any nail polish? It’s on sale right now, part of our BOGO sale, in which you get one regular price but the second is 50% off.” The woman touched each polish as she considered the different colors and held the glass to her hand.

“Can you tell me what time it is?” She didn’t look away from the polish.

“It’s 4:45.” Jill waited on her decisions before closing out the sale.

“Oh, geez, I gotta go.” The woman pushed two nail polishes to the register and opened her wallet. She took out a credit card, but hesitated, then pushed it back in. She pulled out cash instead. “How much is it? She looked to the screen and began digging out change.

“It’s $35.78.”
The woman handed her exact change, counted to the penny. Jill watched as she covered the photos in her wallet with a dollar bill. “Thanks for shopping with us. Come back soon.”

Jill handed her the bag handles and watched her wipe her forehead sweat into the palm of her hand and then off onto her jean skirt.

“Thanks,” she said and left the store, turning one way and choosing to go in the opposite at last second. Jill watched her enter JCPenney and disappear into the displays of makeup and perfume.

Maybe she’ll buy a whole new wardrobe. Or even light makeup. Nah. She shouldn’t. Her face was naturally beautiful. But pants, pants would change her life. Jill couldn’t fathom having to live in the world without pants.

Two more customers came and went, besides the woman with screaming toddlers, before it was closing time. Jill had forgotten how close to closing time it was, because she had become fixated on the child sitting on top of the pancakes. Now, instead of pushing children off the pancakes as he did earlier, he sat indian-style with legs crossed and his chin propped up with his fists, in the center of the square of butter. He had been sitting there for at least the last fifteen minutes, watching each child put on shoes and leave the play area holding a parent’s hand. He watched as he scanned. His eyes glanced back and forth from the right to the left, overtop of the glaring food court signs, and beyond the walk-and-talkers. He just sat.

The announcement: “The Ashland Mall will be closing in five minutes. Again, stores will be closing in five minutes” came over the loudspeaker and children began
sticking to the equipment like the shiny lacquer paint syrup was real. Parents were pulling children who were hanging on to giant eggs and bacon. One woman demanded that her daughter get out of the bowl of cereal ball pit now, as she pointed to the ground sternly. And the crying began. But the boy who had conquered the tower of hotcakes, slid down the clear gloss glazed syrup to find his shoes. He sat on the edge of the booth, tying and re-tying his shoes to do the bunny ears perfectly.

Jill turned the computer screen off and took the money drawer from the register, locking it up for her manager to count the next morning. She gathered her purse from under the counter and flipped the light switch. She reached up as high as she could and stood on her tip-toes to reach the metal gate to pull it to her. All of the shops began dropping their gates, crick crack high-pitch squeal of metal on metal began overpowering the sobs of whiny children. They usually knew by this point that Mom and Dad weren’t lying, the store really was closing. Sniffles became lighter and mothers wiped their noses and left the napkins on the tables of the food court. All was well and ice cream was promised.

As Jill latched the gate and saw everyone leaving, returning from the doors they came through like habitual ants, the little dark-haired boy stood at the edge waiting. Jill bent down to him. “Does your Mom or Dad work here?” Jill thought maybe he was playing while a parent worked nearby. Some moms did it. They couldn’t afford daycare.

“No.” The boy shook his head quickly but kept his eyes on her.

“Well, do you know where they are?”

“My Mom got mad because I wasn’t ready to leave, but she said she’d be back.”
“Well, maybe she’s just checking out and is running a little behind. I’ll sit with you and wait.”

The boy frantically searched the hallways that now looked like empty gerbil tunnels.

“So, do you have any sisters or brothers?” He was getting ready to cry. She could feel it. She just wanted something to take away his fear.

“I have a baby sister that was born last week. Her name is Naomi.”

“I see. What a pretty name.”

“It’s a Bible name. We believe in the Lord.” The little boy stared at her, maybe hoping that she was going to tell him that she “believed” in the Lord, too. This was obviously a stock response taught to him.

“Very cool.” Stock response returned.

The security guard approached them as they sat on the toast. “Is there a problem here, ma’am? We’re locking all the doors.”

“Actually, this isn’t my little boy. We can’t find his mom.”

“Son, what’s your mom’s name? And do you remember what your mom was wearing and what color hair she has?”

“Yes. Ewiza and she always wears the skirts. And she has chocolate hair, like candy bars.”

That was the moment Jill realized she had sold his mother the very shoes she walked away from him in. She remembered seeing her start toward the playground and then choosing to go the other way. Jill pulled the security guard to the side and told him
what had happened earlier. He said they would review the tape and see if they could identify her. For the moment, the little boy would have to go with him until they could figure things out.

The security guard walked the small boy to the office and she watched them as she walked behind them. A little hand in a big hand and the boy’s eyes still scanning the halls. It was easy for her judge Eliza, but here she was walking away, too. Not knowing where he was going, who he’d be with, or if someone would compulsively talk to him before he cries. Even make him breakfast. It was enough to make her want to abandon her sandals for a skirt and sneakers.
The herd of teenage girls shuffled and squeaked their tennis shoes against the
gymnasium floor in a panic trying to push and shove their way to the holy inner circle.
Very rarely did they get to see fights with such intensity and brutality. The beastly circus
usually took place in the boys’ gym class, but today the title would be awarded to a
female.

Veronica (Vinny) Hatfield had hold of Casey Beckham’s blonde ponytail and was
wiping the brick wall with her face. Her cheekbone cracked as it hit the grainy cement
and bloody saliva squirted from the side of her mouth. Her eye was already swollen shut
on the left and her nose—rumored to have been fixed in fourth grade—now had a bump
in the center and lay slightly to the right. Girls watching gasped in disgust every time
Casey was punched. Her face appeared to be more mutilated and dripping heavier
buckets of red rain every time the other girls took their hands off their eyes to peek again
at the horror of it all. Vinny paused for a moment when Casey lost her breath, and for a
moment, she appeared to be granting mercy. However, Vinny was just switching arms.
She swung her fist with such force that her teeth gritted in a devilish smile and strands of
her dark hair fell from her braid and clumped to the sweat on her forehead. She felt the
last few seconds of angst in her and began to machine-gun small jabs out to Casey, as if it
were the last ten seconds in round twelve. But there was no bell ringing. Occasionally
Casey would get a free wild arm out with a kamikaze mission, but it never made contact.

Casey Beckham was the girl every girl wanted to be—on the surface. She was
blonde and petite with blue eyes as bright as the Atlantic Ocean. She had full
unapologetic breasts that rested perfectly beneath shirts and a perky ass. She was what every football player was having wet dreams about and Vinny knew it. Vinny would sometimes wait by her locker until Casey walked by to her first class, just so she could see how boys reacted to her presence. The only problem with Casey was the same mouth she used to cheer for her team, she used to rape other girls’ reputations. She was loud and obnoxious, talked like she was chewing her face, and always thought that her opinion and comments were so damn cool and funny that it belonged belted over everyone else’s. Vinny Hatfield was her reality check.

Vinny was ordinary. She had no outside goals beyond making it through the day of school and somehow sliding by and not being noticed. Her dark hair was always pulled back in a braid and her face untouched by makeup. Every day she wore a t-shirt and jeans with the same pair of white tennis shoes, and carried her tall frame awkwardly. The only thing she could think while beating Casey Beckham was how dare she call her a “dyke” and cause her to become noticed. How dare she whisper to others and cause their attention to focus on what she was or was not. But now that Vinny was plunged into the spotlight, she was determined to make sure it didn’t happen again.

By the time the gym teacher pulled them apart, their limbs tangled and dangling like marionettes, a squad was on their way for Casey and Vinny was suspended until further notice. A teacher accompanied Vinny to the restroom to get a wet paper towel to wipe her face and then her white sneaker that had turned pink after the smearing of red drops. Then the teacher escorted Vinny to the door to walk home. Neither of them said a
word. The teacher didn’t care to ask Vinny why she had exploded, so Vinny never offered an explanation.

Vinny imagined on her walk home while kicking tiny pebbles as far as she could, what it would be like to tell her father about the fight. That was how they bonded, over someone getting the crap knocked out of them. Every night after helping her dad paint cars and repair motors in the garage, they would sit in front of the old floor model television and watch the boxing event of the evening. Jess livened up every time he saw someone get the air knocked out of them. He’d stand to his feet in the last ten seconds and root for his favorite. After the final bell dinged, he’d sit back in his recliner with his arms folded on his chest and say, “I love that ole boy. That was a good’n.” Vinny wished that someone had recorded the fight so that she could show Jess that every punch was calculated and well-timed, perfectly placed in the openings between Casey’s arms and abdomen. My God, how proud he would have been. She crossed over the railroad tracks and started on the last stretch of pavement home.

Vinny’s mom, however, was a different story. She was an instant explosion of religious-based prayers and beckon songs every time Vinny got in trouble. It was always chaos trying to explain her side of anything to the tight-pulled bun and her home-made, Jesus-inspired wardrobe. Vinny had already decided to skip the whole “Sweet Jesus, give her patience” plea, and go straight to the “heathen on hell’s highway” spiel.

At home, the principal had already called Jess and Vinny’s mother, Lana. They sat on the front porch swing talking, waiting on Vinny’s arrival.

“I knew it was gonna happen, Jess. I knew it. I’ve prayed, oh how I’ve prayed.”
“Lana, maybe the girl hit her first.” Jess rested his thumbs on the suspenders of his overalls, looking from one end of the street to the other.

“It doesn’t matter. That girl had to go to the hospital it was so bad. We’re lucky she’s not in a juvenile jail.” Lana held on to the porch swing chain with her left hand and smoothed her pastel flowered housedress on her thigh with her right.

“She’s not gonna go to a jail. Kids fight all of the time.”

“Kids don’t just fight anymore. It escalates into something bigger.”

“You’re overacting, Lana. Can we let this be what it is? Our daughter was in a fist fight. That she won. She was not injured.”

“But she might not be going back to school. And she is our daughter not our son.”

Jess pulled a cigar from the front pocket of his coveralls and unwrapped it.

“I’ve never told you how to act around her, Jess. But she can’t keep watching boxing and paintin’ cars and never learn how to dress, or speak to other women. The rules are different. And she will continue to be antagonized unless we help her.”

Jess lit his cigar, and Lana waved the smoke from her face and left the swing to go inside. Vinny smelled a cigar in the air. Jess was waiting for her. He had on fairly clean overalls—he must not have gotten much done, she thought. Vinny approached him with a smile, but stopped at the first step when it wasn’t reciprocated.

“Daddy, you wait’n on me?” She stood with the pink sneaker hoisted on the porch.

“Yep, since the principal called.”

“So you mad, or you wanna know how it went down? ‘Cause I was good.”
“Well, Vinny, this may keep you from goin’ back. They might kick you out altogether. So I’m not mad that you took up for yourself, but I’m mad that you hurt someone else and that you might not get to go back to school.”

Jess took a few more puffs off of his cigar while Vinny stood in silence. She made her way up to the porch swing and sat down beside him. Jess put his cigar out, grinding the red burning tip along the corner edge of the house, and placed it in the ash-tray. He took a deep breath, and explained with his exhale, “You’re gonna start learning how to be a lady,” he said while the last breath puffed from his mouth. “And spendin’ more time with your momma. Church on Sunday mornins, learnin’ how to cook and socialize, and no more watchin’ boxin’ late at night and fiddlin’ with cars in the garage.” He turned his face toward hers and stared into her eyes. He only did this when he meant business.

“But Daddy, you can’t do that. That’s who I am. I love those things. And I love spendin’ time with you.” She tried to hold back the tears.

“No, it’s not who ya are, Vinny, it’s who I made ya. Jess looked away.

“No, you didn’t Daddy, I can be both! Please, I’ll be girly, too.” She let her hand rest lightly on his arm.

“Now I ain’t gonna argue with ya no more Vinny. Ya can’t be both, and it’s time to be a lady. I’ve spent twenty years goin’ to the same damn factory day in and day out, so that my girl can be somethin’ better than me. You can’t give it all up because I haven’t taught ya better. Now go in with your momma and see what ya can help with.”

She looked at his hands that were lined permanently with grease in his pores and toughened by hard calluses. Jess’s tone had become gritty and serious and Vinny had
never pushed him past that point before. She stood up from the swing and walked to the
door, and with her hand on the knob, she started to turn, but had to close her eyes and
take one last inhale of the cigar smoke to freeze the mental picture of who she was in
direct comparison to him. She knew the horseplay ended on the other side of the
doorway. So she asked one last thing.

“Daddy, will you like me at all when I’m not anything like you anymore? When I’m dressed in pretty clothes and painted nails that can’t get dirty, and when I stay on the phone too long talking to girls about boys you don’t like?”

“Sure I will, I like your momma, and we ain’t nothin’ like each other. It’s what girls do.”

Vinny half smiled but still didn’t look back. She walked in the house and ran through the living room, to the staircase that led to her bedroom. She heard her mother dash out of the kitchen.

“Veronica Marie! I need to talk to you. Come here now!”

“Momma,” Vinny yelled down the staircase, “Daddy already did all the talkin’. Go lie down before you hurt yourself chantin’ and raisin’ spirits.” Vinny slammed the door.

The phone rang. Veronica was upstairs in her room getting ready to slide into her daisy-yellow sequined prom dress. After the fight she had begged the principal to let her come back and finish school. She wanted to make her father proud. Matthew, the minister’s son, was the only boy who liked her and was willing to take her to the prom.
This was her big chance. Lana was downstairs in the kitchen humming a hymn and carefully pinning her boutonniere to her favorite pink cardigan when Jess walked in the door. He was covered in grease from head to toe and had years of it caked underneath his fingernails. He took the white rag from the counter-top and began to wipe off his hands. Veronica stood at the top of the stairwell with her hair curled and carefully sprayed to stay in place. Her makeup was meticulously painted and she listened to her parents from afar.

“I’m not gonna make it to go see her walk across that stage, Lana,” Jess said. “I’ve got to change that boy’s oil in his Mustang and get it taped up before it gets dark. You’re gonna have to go without me.” As he laid the rag back on the counter, he leaned his body to one side and rested. Lana looked at her husband with the eyes of a woman who valued a hard-working husband. She dared not say anything about his choices. He’d spent the last twenty years making sure they had everything they needed, and then some. She’d watched him go to a job he hated, to work in a factory that paid him far less than what his life and body were worth. The only thing he ever asked for was a cold beer when he got home, before starting his second shift of work, painting and repairing cars in the garage when there were people to pay. And still he came home to her every night. He held her hand when they walked into a room and gave her the occasional tap on the behind while she stood doing dishes. He was a good man. He’d never raised a hand to her or Veronica. He was a good father. And his hair that had turned from lustrous dark brown to salt and pepper seemed to have slowly changed while no one was looking, or
when time was going too fast. It was a constant race now, to get things done on time, before they ran out of time completely.

She looked out the kitchen window above the sink and peered out at the boy next door. He was a small boy, couldn’t be more than seven years old. She admired how he always shut the garage door after he got his bicycle out. Small things a parent may never notice added up. Veronica had always been that kind of a daughter, but only to Jess. She had taken interest in womanly things, but only after she’d been faced with the possibility of disappointing Jess.

“Lana, I’m going back out to the garage. Tell Veronica to tell me bye before she leaves,” Jess whispered. He walked out the door, with his work boots clunking on the clean white linoleum, leaving a trail of imprinted dirt. A rush of feet came barreling down the stairs. Veronica was wearing a pair of her father’s overalls smeared in grease and heavy-soiled, but with her hair still perfectly curled and lipstick glittering in the light.

“I’m gonna go help Daddy so he can go, too,” Veronica said to her mother.

“Veronica,” Lana said, shaking her head. Jess deserved to see her in this moment.

“Go. And try not to mess up your hair.”

Veronica raced out the door and down to the garage, where she peered into the dirty windows. It had been so long since she’d been down here that she’d forgotten the smell of paint lacquer. She creaked the door open and went straight to the roll-out and sat down. Jess watched her come in, and blushed, (he had covered up her kindergarten handprint in the cement with the rollover). He watched her reach in the cabinet and pull out the oil funnel, get a dry rag from the blue barrel, and scoot the case of Penzoil over to the
grill of the car. She laid her back on the rolling board and noticed all the new colors that had been added to the floor. Every time he painted a vehicle, there were remnants glazed on the gritty floor, creating a Jackson Pollock of every color. There were outlines of vehicles like chalk drawings at a homicide investigation, except her daddy wasn’t the investigator, he was the resurrector. She rolled her body under the car and placed the bowl under the valve to catch the oil. She did it carefully so as to not smudge her manicure, but did it instinctively. She tapped her toes waiting, listening to the music echoing out of the FM radio her father always had playing. It was forever stuck on the seventies station. Her favorite was early Tina Turner. “Proud Mary” Tina Turner. She heard the steady flow change to a persistent stream, then to drops, then to silence. She twisted the valve shut and rolled back out from beneath the car to find her date standing in the garage door with a marigold corsage. She stood up and dusted her pants, then primped her hair.

“Matthew, sorry I’m not completely ready yet. I just need a few more minutes.”

“Vinny, go on and get dressed. I’ll fill it up,” Jess said.

“Daddy, I can do both. I’ve got time.” She cracked the seal on a quart of oil and tipped it into the funnel. Matthew started making conversation with Jess, and they both discussed whether or not the Mustang was a four cylinder or six. She heard their awkward pauses, and words floating waiting for comments. Then she threw the empty quart in the barrel and cracked the seal on a new one. Every time she cracked the seal she thought of her father opening a cold beer after a day’s work, and thought that the exhilaration of the first gulp must be so freeing. As freeing perhaps as it was to her to
crack that oil seal. After the last quart of oil had drained, she twisted the cap back on the car and dropped the hood; then it dawned on her that her father had called her Vinny. She’d finished the job of changing the oil and Jess had taped the windows, so she edged her way over to her father.

“Daddy, you need to take a shower fast. You and Momma can meet us to take pictures, then Matthew and I will go eat and head to the dance. Okay?” Vinny said.

“Yeah,” Jess said with a smile. “Let’s shut her down for the night.” Matthew walked out the garage door in his coal-black tuxedo and freshly gelled hair. Veronica followed behind him and caught up to his side and whispered to him, “Sorry about that, I didn’t mean to make you wait.”

Matthew peered at her face and slightly blushed. “Are you kiddn’? That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen a girl do.” He smiled with such uncontrollable intensity that Veronica knew, it was all right.

Jess sat in his recliner surfing channels looking for a fight. He’d missed them all while watching Veronica at Grande March. Not that he cared, but he found himself bored waiting to feel sleepy. He thought about how beautiful she’d looked, elegant and pristine walking with her arm locked into the corner of a young man’s. He wondered where the time had gone. It was not long ago that she wanted him to sit with her on the floor and play Ken while she was Barbie. And it seemed like yesterday she’d decided to pile all the Barbies in a corner and run over them with the battery-powered jeep they bought her. The beautiful woman he had last seen was what suited her the best and had the most to offer
to her future. He knew that the moment in the garage this evening was a last glimpse of his little buddy, all grown up. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, thankful to be her father, and teetering on the edge of rest, he flirted with drifting off, when the screeching of tires pulled onto the curb outside their house.

Veronica threw open the door of Matthew’s car and jumped from the passenger seat. One of the shoulder straps was broken on her dress and she was carrying her silver sandals in her hand coming up the sidewalk. Jess opened the front door and stared out. He’d made it to the first step when Veronica turned around and punched Matthew in the nose, knocking him back several steps. She pointed at him, and although the words were hard to make out, Jess figured out Matthew didn’t get very far in his plan, and probably wouldn’t be around the house anymore. Matthew held his nose while it bled in his hand and ruined his rented white tuxedo shirt. He turned and walked back to his car the instant he saw Jess. Lana ran up behind Jess and immediately began yelling at Veronica for mutilating the reverend’s son’s nose. Passing them, Veronica charged her way into the house. She puffed air out of her mouth, blowing her bangs out of her eyes, and dropped her sandals onto the white linoleum kitchen floor, knocking imprinted dirt from the soles. She wiped the smudged mascara under her eyes and crinkled her face.

“Momma, really? Why are you yellin’ at me? This ain’t my fault!”

“Veronica, what am I supposed to tell Reverend Hanson in the morning when he asks me about why you broke his son’s nose?”

“Momma, tell him his son was tryin’ to check my oil, even without a filter, and ask him what Jesus would do!”
She turned and stomped up the stairs mumbling on the way up to her room. Lana went immediately to the phone. Jess sat down in his recliner and put his hands across his chest and exhaled. The last ten seconds of the fight had ended with a TKO in round twelve. He propped his feet up on the ottoman and whispered, “I love my Vinny. That was a good’n.”
Milly helped me pick out an anniversary card at Wal-Mart. She sat in the bottom part of the buggy on top of a case of bottled water while I looked around. Her pale blue ruffled dress hung over the sides. She smacked her white patent leather shoes on the metal bars like she was performing at a tap recital. With long dark curly hair parted in the middle and separated into ponytails, her dark eyes that I recognized as mine gazed at me, patiently waiting for me to be done shopping. I felt like I had the most-well behaved and beautiful six year-old daughter anyone had ever seen.

“When you get big you’re gonna learn quick that you have to pick the perfect card for the occasion. It takes time ‘cause it truly is the thought that counts,” I said, raising one eyebrow and shifting my head to the left. I hesitantly picked up another anniversary card, this one covered in silver glitter. Milly sighed and propped her elbows on her knees and buried her chin in the palm of her hands.

“Are we done yet?” she whined. She watched the other children pass a ball in the crowded aisle. Their mother didn’t seem to care that they were knocking over displays of Doritos and arguing over who would pick them up. I checked my watch to make sure I wasn’t over the time limit before Tim came in to get me.

“Almost, darlin’. Almost.” I held up two cards for Milly to see. “So which one do you think I should get, the one with the purple flowers or the silver?”

“Um…I think the purple, ‘cause purple’s my favorite color.” She pointed excitedly to the card in my left hand.

“I knew you would choose that one,” I said. “Know why I knew? Guess.”
“‘Cause purple’s our favorite color!” she shouted.

“You are correct. Milly wins. What does Milly win?” I asked.

Her eyes widened and she twirled a loose string at the end of her dress around her pointing finger. The two Dorito display Godzillas in the aisle stared at me as if their mother had never given them a prize before. They took turns glaring at me then back at their mother in confusion. The woman grabbed both of them by their wrists and made them hold onto the buggy while she turned the corner into the next aisle, avoiding my eyes.

“I think I want…I think I want…a princess dress to play make-believe in,” she said, with a teeth baring smile. I held out the card she’d chosen, hoping she would hold it for me. She reached her hands out to grasp it and it fell to the floor of the buggy. Disappointed that she hadn’t caught it, she bent over to pick it up.

“That’s all right, Milly, just leave it there. Make sure and not step on it, Baby.”

She smiled and nodded, sitting back down on the case of water.

We left the greeting card aisle, turning the buggy around the corner Milly raised her hands as if riding a roller coaster. We headed to the back of the store toward the toys. Milly turned her head from side to side looking at merchandise along the way, never asking for anything because that’s how perfect children acted. I knew to stop at the posters, though; it was our tradition. She stood up in the buggy, and together we flipped through to find the dolphin posters.
“Look at that one, Melissa!” She pointed at one with a deep blue ocean and bright vivid red and yellow fish lining the bottom. She waited for me to respond, and for a moment, I didn’t want to.

“Milly, don’t call me Melissa. Call me Mommy, I’m your Mommy.”

Milly’s eyes swelled like water balloons and she frowned.

I turned the buggy around and headed to the cash register, trying not to look in her eyes. I looked side to side, watching oncoming traffic of quick shoppers and trying to avoid her face that had become synchronized with mine. But I wanted to give in, more than anything. To buy in one more time and believe it was okay. I abandoned the buggy five feet from the register. I left the case of water. Milly. I placed the card we’d picked out into the hands of the cashier and she held it as she scanned. She could tell I was upset, as my tears had actually started rolling down my face. My mascara was starting to saturate my eyelashes causing what Tim called “Post-It Note eyes.” I pulled my dark hair back into a pony tail with the hair-tie from around my wrist.

“Three forty-nine, ma’am,” she said with a half-smile and handed me a tissue from her blue apron. I took it and brushed it up my eyelashes, trying not to smear it worse.

I pulled my tie-dye themed debit card from my wallet and swiped it, then signed by the X on the machine. “Have a nice evening, and thank you for the tissue.”

I walked to the sliding exit doors, card in one hand, tissue in the other. The doors parted and new sunshine, the blinding after-the rain kind, in which white clouds drifted and light rays beamed down. I scanned the parked cars, looking for Tim. He’d dropped
me off at the door during the rain, and I had no idea where he’d parked. I finally found his Yankee baseball cap bobbing around our rusted forest green pickup truck. To see the truck in all its glory, with orange and dusty panels of rust above the wheels, and green that faded from the front end to the back was sometimes embarrassing. We kept it, though, because it still had life left and we were the only ones who could value what was left, which was a more-times-than-not dependable ride. Tim, though, he was the best part of the view. A tall, man with faded blue jeans, tan work boots, and a red and navy flannel shirt. He was collecting the empty Mountain Dew cans from the bed of the truck with his left hand and putting them in the corner under an empty milk crate. He always had a lit cigarette in his right hand, so his work buddies called him Lefty. He flipped the cigarette to the ground when he saw me coming near. I watched my black patent leather boots resist the rain puddles as I walked through them, one half-lifted foot at a time.

“You okay?” he asked, as I approached the tailgate.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” I said, opening the passenger truck door.

He entered the driver-side door and met me on the torn and faded seat.

“It took you a while. I thought I was gonna have to come in.” He stared through the windshield at the people passing.

“Nope. I’m good. I even paid for my card.”

I watched the middle-aged lady beside us in a red Hundai fasten her daughter’s seat-belt and I slowly looked away.

“You see Milly in there?” he asked, adjusting his baseball cap.

“Yeah.”
“How long was it this time ‘til you figured out she wasn’t real?’

I hated that he asked the question, and had many times before. He knew she wasn’t real. He never saw her. And he knew sometimes I couldn’t tell if she was real or not. I’d let her evolve in my imagination from a still born baby in 1993 to a six year-old. I wanted her to be real. I cleared my throat.

“She called me Melissa when we were looking at the posters. In my mind she calls me Mommy.” My voice hoarse in the beginning, and shrill by the end.

“Did ya leave her in there, like Doc Young said to?”

“Yes. I left the buggy at the register and didn’t make eye contact after I realized.”

I had my doubts with the therapy assignment this doctor wanted me to do. He wanted me to spend thirty minutes in a public place, semi-alone, just with Tim nearby. And when Milly would show up I needed to rationalize all the reasons why she wasn’t real in order to make my mind accept it. I lingered longer than I should have, in the fantasy. But I still found the puzzle piece that even I couldn’t force into place. It was helping somewhat, without prescriptions I couldn’t afford to fill. I just knew that once I didn’t see Milly anymore, the next step would be to empty the storage unit of baby gifts, and re-paint the room of the house I never entered. I’m not comfortable with being pushed. Tim put his calloused hand on my thigh and held it there, while he pushed the clutch in the floorboard. With his left hand he turned the steering wheel and slowly backed us out of the parking lot.

“Wait. Stop. Please.” I braced myself with my left hand on the dashboard as he pushed on the brakes and the truck came to a staggering halt. My wedding ring pinched
my finger. I wanted to bow my head and let the tears gush. But I didn’t. Tim was an amazing man. A man that always wanted a family. And although we’d tried for several years to become pregnant again, it had never happened. I was scared of giving birth again to a baby who never cried. It was like watching a family member open a Christmas present that they were disappointed in. Everyone was waiting. Ready to celebrate. I tried. The room was purple, clothes folded. It just didn’t happen right.

“I’m sorry that I’m crazy now.” I turned my head to the window and watched the passing cars.

“I don’t think you’re crazy, Mel.” He lifted his cigarette pack to his mouth and pulled out a smoke with his lips, then put his soft pack back in the pocket of his flannel shirt, holding the truck half-way out of the parking space.

“Who hallucinates children, Tim? Women who are crazy, that’s who.” I picked at a hang-nail on my thumb until it bled. He flipped his silver lighter open and blazed the tip.

“That’s the only problem you’ve ever had, Mel,” he said as he pulled the truck back in the parking spot. He blew smoke out of his mouth in the direction of the window crack and flipped light white ash. “You been a good woman to me, ain’t ya?”

I turned in the truck seat sideways to see him clearly. He was serious. There were no sarcastic remarks, no half-hearted smiles. I wasn’t as good to him as I could have been all these years. I was so concerned with making my mother happy, with making his mother happy, with producing a child and making everyone happy. Life had become a waiting room in which the whole family sat, bought peanut butter crackers and dark
flavorless coffee from the vending machine. When you’re poor, pride and entertainment come from the things you can accomplish without money. You just have to stay in the moment.

I forgot to cook him breakfast this morning. His face had three-day scruff lining his prominent jaw and there was a rip in his favorite jeans. I poked the tip of my finger in the hole and felt the hair on his leg. “Maybe I’ve been a good woman to you. In some ways.”

“Well, when the mill picks up better insurance, you go to a better Doc if you want. But this might work. We don’t know ‘til we try it, right?” He’d said this another time to me. We had a purple Corsica with no air conditioning in the dry-suffocating heat of ’91 when we first got married. It had vinyl seats so when we first sat down our legs got scorched. I found myself praying to sweat so that the friction between skin and vinyl dissipated with enough lubrication to scoot down in the bucket seat, to find comfort. Tim knew we had a long trip to make and the night before he froze water in milk jugs and then tied the handles of the jugs to the inside handles of the car. In the heat, the jugs radiated cold air and we lasted almost the entire trip without being miserable. I had pink chapped patches on my legs from being too close to the ice in the beginning of the trip, but eventually it was perfect. I didn’t sweat, the milk jugs did. He was right then. We didn’t know then that it would work. But we tried and it helped. A car door slammed beside us.
“Right,” I said, hearing the high pitched questions of a child walking with his mother. Tim’s ability to stay positive was sometimes the only thing anchoring me. Without him, I’d just be wandering around. Not knowing. At all.

“All right then. For God sakes, I needs to eat. Will you please let me pull out of here so we can eat?” Tim grew up the adopted son of a horse rancher who took on foster boys for cheap labor. His one and only real joy in his childhood was eating. No amount was ever denied to him, because the more he ate, the more energy he had, and baling hay took time. He still had that attitude, and I dared not change it. For Tim food made any situation better. I flat-line smiled and nodded yes.

“Shew. Thank you, Lord, for a wife that is willin’ to feed a man,” he said while letting off the cluch and shifting into drive, changing gears, shifting me, forward and back, but forward again while I tried to sign the anniversary card that Milly and I picked out for him.
Nancy was at the kitchen sink doing dishes the last time she let her husband scare her. She’d made a big dinner of country-fried steak with mashed potatoes and white gravy, just like he liked. She watched him cut each piece of meat off and slowly put it in his mouth, filling his stomach past full. He belched and wiped the grease from the corner of his salt and pepper mustache, then placed his fork down on the placemat. The truth was that Hank always had a degrading comment to make about Nancy’s weight, but Hank was double her size. She had stopped eating dinner that night long before he did, and remembered to put a candy bar in her apron to eat in the bathroom after he fell asleep. But she had to endure the comments before she made it to her moments of freedom.

“Nancy, suppose’n you put down your eatin’ irons and lost some of that ass. Wouldn’t you feel better about walkin’ around in the world?” He smiled.

“Hank, how ‘bout every now and then you stop the semi on the shoulder of the road and got out to take a walk? Would that make you feel better about me?” She never looked at him when she fought back. Instead, she just picked at the clear coat of nail polish that never lasted more than three days.

“I’m what the lot-lizards call a great catch, baby. You should be proud to walk around with this.” He pulled at the pocket on his uniform red and blue flannel shirt and pulled out a toothpick, placed the tip on his bottom lip and bit it with his teeth.

She knew Hank had cheated on her before. She saw the text messages on his phone late at night on weekends when he came home. He was too ignorant to put the
numbers under a different name in his phone. One name appeared on his phone as “Twenty doller big tittees.” She stopped asking about them after a while. She was too tired of hearing the excuses. But he was growing increasingly aggravated that she would no longer sleep with him. She looked at him from across the table balancing the toothpick and he widened his eyes and raised his eyebrows. His hair had thinned over the years and his trucker hat, sweaty around the rim, was on the table she polished yesterday. She collected the plates and silverware and headed to the sink. He was watching the Nascar race in the living room anyway. She didn’t understand why he didn’t just eat in there instead of stretching his neck every evening.

The hot soapy water was already drawn and she eased the plates in. Often times her greatest escape was looking out the kitchen window to the neighbor’s house. An old couple lived there and she would see them outside a lot. The woman, Shirley, was in her seventies and would sit on the porch-swing while her husband William collected tomatoes from the garden. They weren’t in the yard this time, though, and she began thinking about the tin cup that used to hang from the window frame.

The tin cup was an item she selected from her grandfather’s estate. The adults let the children into the cabin the day after the old man died. All that was left was a broken-down shed of a home. The linoleum that once resembled a floor with glitter scattered about, was now soot covered and torn and a dull shade of grey with no sparkle left. The walls were raw wood that would splinter your fingers if you touched them and the only decoration was a banjo hanging on the wall from a rusty railroad spike. All of the valuables had been brought to the living room area where white five-gallon buckets were
often turned upside down and used as extra seats by guests. But what Nancy was looking for when it was her turn to choose something to keep as memorabilia, wasn’t in the group of things offered to the children. She walked to the kitchen and spotted the tin cup hanging right where it always had been. No one else had thought it valuable, but it was valuable to her. It was the only thing in the entire house that still reflected anything, including her five-year old eyes.

On her fifth birthday she stood on a five gallon bucket to reach the kitchen counter. She was peeling potatoes with her grandmother when the thin wooden screen door clapped behind them and a gust of wind surged through. By the time Nancy looked backward, her grandmother was slammed to the linoleum floor by her grandfather while he held a dead chicken to her face, screaming about how the chickens were dying because she wasn’t scattering the feed thoroughly. Nancy peed down her leg and turned her back to them, standing completely still and hoping her grandfather didn’t notice. She caught a glimpse of herself in the tin cup that was slightly swaying by the handle, saw her eyes widen, and then closed them tight hoping she would see no more. A strong forearm suddenly scooped her up around her waist and whisked her into the living room, while the empty bucket echoed as it turned over and the handle scraped along the floor. Once she opened her eyes, she saw it was her father holding her. That feeling of closing her eyes in a bad situation and opening them in a loving one; she’d never forget it. She’d long for the ability to do it in her adult life.

Now standing at the sink, Nancy felt the breeze of the early night air coming through the open window, and remembered how the tin cup used to ting up against the
wood frame. She picked the utensils out of the murky dish water one by one, washing them quickly with her dish rag, and placing them in the drainer. The last time she really looked at the tin cup was months ago when she noticed a number (403) carved in the bottom. As a project she went to the local library and researched tin cups. She found out that some of them were forged by slaves and numbered according to plantation so that they could not be traded for travel, but were still dining ware for the slaves. The cup’s number corresponded with a plantation on the outskirts of West Virginia. Somehow it had made it to Minford, Ohio, with her grandfather. Now to her home. When she found out about the cup she called Hank.

“I’m driving, talk quick,” he said.

“That tin cup I got out of my grandad’s home was once owned by slaves. Can you believe that?”

“That shitty metal thing you drink out of sometimes?”

“Yes, the tin cup. Isn’t that neat?

“Only if it’s worth somethin’ now. But you keep drinkin’ that slave water. I like where this is goin’.”

“You’re a dick. Don’t come home at all.” She hung up.

Her excitement was always ruined by his jerk-off attitude. It was hard to believe that she once loved him. She often wondered if she confused desperation to not grow any older than twenty without starting what all the women referred to as “real life” with love. She was anxious to be a young mother. She wanted the energy to run and play with them, and to make a life out of raising children and keeping a home cozy for those she loved.
Hank used to answer her mother and father with “Yes, ma’am” and “No, sir.” He used to have manners. It was easier to love him then because at least he put on a front for the rest of the world that didn’t embarrass her. Now he just didn’t care. That’s why she had no problem telling him to be a truck driver. He was gone most of the week. The bills were paid. She didn’t have to go anywhere in public with him, because, while he was home, he wanted to be at home. She just had to endure the two days he was there.

“Brandon call this week?” Hank’s voice rang out over the constant zooming of cars on television.

“Nope.”

“What the hell’s the use in havin’ a son if he never calls or comes around? Pht. Fruit of my loins, my ass. More like wasted jizz, if you ask me.” He snickered.

“Well, I’m not asking you,” she said.

Hank kept watching the television.

Of all the things she thought of her son, a waste was not one of them. Hank had wanted him to join the army when he turned eighteen. It was the height of the war in Iraq and they were searching for Bin Laden, still. Brandon didn’t think America should be over there but Hank wanted his son to be a hero.

Surrounded by Americana décor of metal painted stars and hay string bows in his mother’s living room, Brandon told his father, “I’m not joining that war. I won’t die for oil. They target me because we are poor. I am poor but not a dumbass.”
“I won’t be the only man with a grown son that won’t fight for his country’s freedom. You don’t join, you can pack your shit, big man.” But Hank hadn’t served in the military, either.

That Sunday Nancy packed Hank’s bag so he could go back on the road. He didn’t even tell Brandon goodbye. Once Hank had left, she helped pack her only child’s bags to leave as well.

“Where will you go?” Nancy asked.

“I’ll travel around. Maybe look into college. But I’ll always call you on Thursdays while he is gone.” He was tall, almost six foot two, her son, and muscular from his senior year of high school football. “I’ll be okay, Momma. Come with me?”

“If I go with you, he’ll look for us out of spite. If I stay, you may have time.”

She felt Brandon’s hand pat hers as she stared at the empty dresser drawers. He put his bag over his shoulder and kissed her forehead. He took the bag she had made for him, with leftover cornbread and a pork chop sandwich. Then she handed him the tin cup.

“Just take it,” she said, “so if you are outside and thirsty, you can have somethin’ to drink. But keep it. It’s the only thing I have worth anything besides you.”

Brandon took it and left the house. She watched him drive in his old navy blue beat-up pickup until she couldn’t see him anymore.

She stood at the kitchen window, remembering her son driving away months ago, and dropped the carving knife into the sink to soak. It was the last thing to wash. She focused on the surrounding noises and noticed that Nascar was no longer on. She looked
across the bar and saw that Hank was no longer in his dirty beige recliner. He must have gone outside to smoke.

Nancy stood in the shower with the curtain drawn and ate her candy bar. She locked the door behind her so he wouldn’t walk in. For those three minutes, that candy bar was freedom. The chocolate and peanut butter melted in her mouth and it was like exhaling after being under the water. The light bounced through the purple shower curtain casting a shade of purple onto the spotless white tiles. Lavender bliss and a moment all of her own.

When she stepped out of the shower, she carefully folded the candy bar wrapper in a maxi pad wrapper and placed it in the garbage can. She was certain that he wouldn’t see it. She straightened her shirt and took a long last breath with her hand on the faded gold doorknob and twisted it, stepping out.

Hank had been waiting on the other side of the door wearing a gorilla mask that he’d bought two Halloweens ago. She screamed into the red blinking eyes. He grabbed her face and squished it between his hands to stop her screaming. Hank took his mask off. He laughed so hard that he had to double over to breathe.

“Why would you do that to me?” she screamed. “You fucking asshole.” Then she burst into tears.

“It was just a joke, Nance. My God, you should have seen your face. It was priceless.”

She punched him in the chest twice and tried to walk away, but he followed.
“You need to learn how to take a joke. Come here. Let me make it up to you.” He put his arm around her waist and it wasn’t the same as when her father did. It wasn’t comforting or helpful. It was intrusive and degrading and she tried to open her eyes and be somewhere else, but she couldn’t.

“I wish I would have never told you about that. You take the most personal things and you use them against me.” He pressed his body up against her. She could feel his erection poking into her hip. She cringed and tried to pull away.

“No,” he said. “You need to give a man a chance to fix things.” He held her wrist firmly and pushed her up against the sink. He lifted her skirt and she thought about where the tin cup was.

The next morning, Hank packed his bags into the semi on his own. Nancy wouldn’t help pack anything. She vacuumed the floor and dusted the coffee table and wouldn’t tell him goodbye. So he got in the truck and headed up Highway #23. The roads weren’t busy until noon when the churchies were out in their Sunday best. So he started out around nine. The sky was blue and the sun was forcing itself through the clouds. 99.3FM was playing all of his favorite classic rock songs and he was making it down the highway quickly.

His supervisor came over the channel, “Hank, you got to make it to Michigan by nine tonight. You think you can handle that?”

“Honey, you have no idea what I can handle. Can you handle meetin’ me there?”

“You’re disgusting, and that’s also sexual harassment. Over.”
“Oh Jesus. You women. Learn to take a fuckin’ joke or get out of this man’s world.”

Static on the other end.

_Whore hung up on me. All right, Michigan it is._ He stopped at the first gas station that took the company card to fill up. Lots of women drivin today. Lots of titties to look down on. He told people he loved the scenery, they just never understood which one he meant. He didn’t used to be this guy. He used to have respect for people. Until everyone he met started looking down on him for not finishing high school, for not taking care of his mother after his father died, and more so now after he made Brandon move out. He wanted to be proud of his son but his son never took interest in anything Hank did. He didn’t watch Nascar with him, he finished high school and was smarter than him, but most of all, he didn’t desire to be admired and respected. He didn’t want to wear the uniform.

“He’s a faggot, I can feel it,” Hank told Nancy.

“He’s my son and that’s what matters,” Nancy said.

Brandon played high school football but there was an issue half-way through the school year and Brandon left the team. He didn’t graduate with his senior letter jacket. Nancy wouldn’t tell Hank what the problem was, which fed the doubt even more. Hank never made it to his ballgames, anyway, so he never missed those proud moments. All the same, he didn’t exist to Hank anymore. The gas tank topped full at $259, but at least Bin Laden was dead now.
Six hours into the trip, Hank felt himself getting tired. He watched the cars weave in and out of traffic around him. He hated when little cars got in front of him on a hill and then slowed down on the other side. I can’t stop as quick as you, bitch. I have two thousand pounds on my back, he screamed. I swear to God, it would take one time of a truck slammin’ into your ass and scare’n the shit out of you and you’d stop. You’d never fuckin’ do it again. And then he’d pass the car. He’d go eighty if he had to, barreling down the road, and weave in the center lane so they couldn’t pass him again. He got flipped off more times in one day than any trucker he ever talked to.

“Seventy-nine birds today, boys. Seventy-nine so far. Bid Daddy is on fiya.”

“Jockstrap, ain’t nobody gonna start callin you Big Daddy. Give it up.”

Hank never answered back.

Around 11 p.m. is when he started feeling the sleepiness creeping in. He yawned and stopped for coffee already, about thirty miles back. It just wasn’t working. He still had hours to go. That’s when he spotted the little Cavalier that passed him on I-95 an hour earlier. It was pulled to the side of the road and had its hazard lights flashing. Serves ‘em goddamned right. Used up all his fuel, I bet, tryin to race me. Stupid ass. As Hank drove, he began to see a small figure in the distance, walking on the right side of the yellow line. When he got closer, he saw that it was the man in the car before. And sure enough, he was carrying a red gasoline can. Hank bright-lighted him to see him better. The man turned and looked at Hank and then turned back to the road. Hank began flashing his lights just to aggravate the man, and the man kept walking. Hank couldn’t get
a reaction from him. Hank began edging the truck to the yellow line, feeling what it would be like to be that close to the man without touching him.

I should pass by him with like an inch beside him. That would scare the damn daylights out of him. He imagined the man’s face, how fearful he would be, maybe screaming or jumping into the ditch. That man would be petrified of passing semis for the rest of his life. He got excited the closer he got, and he watched the man try to move out of the light. He’s gonna walk in the grass if I don’t hurry the hell up. Hank shifted into fourth and edged closer, exchanging his foot on the gas for the clutch and then back again. The bugs in the night air looked like white streaks on the windows as he drove. He edged over again. And then he hit him.

The man’s body hit the grill of the truck harder than any deer ever had, and Hank heard the man’s head bounce from the bumper onto the asphalt, and he must have driven over his legs on wheels four and six because truck latch on the loading door clanged. He looked in the rearview mirror, and there was not a car in sight. The man’s body, contorted, faded into the black. He watched the red gasoline can fade with him. Not a car in sight. No one knew. Hank’s heart pounded and the adrenaline filled him. Those last seconds, though, right before he hit, would feed his mind for days. The man’s illuminated face with elbow up to shield him from the light was burnt into Hank’s memory. Though his eyes were hidden, his mouth was open in fear. The man was five shades of yellow. Hank was wide awake now, and it was just enough to make him want to do it again.
Nancy was carrying boxes to her car when her neighbor William came over and tried to help her load them. He walked with a cane but tried to give her his good arm.

“It’s okay, William. I have it.” Nancy patted his hand that was holding the van door open for her. He touched the bruises on her wrist with his index finger and placed his hand over his heart. Nancy stared at his old ragged boots, trying to not to look at him.

“The clock done struck seven, didn’t it, baby girl?”

She shook her head yes, remembering that her father used to say this when he meant that is was finally time for something to happen. “Seven is the number of God’s perfection,” he’d say, “and all good things come in God’s timing.” While Nancy didn’t believe that she was waiting on God or that God had allowed this to happen to her in order to be blessed, she did believe in moving when it was time. And it was past time to go.

“I’m moving out, William. I’ve called my son to come get me and he and his friends are gonna move me out while Hank’s gone on the road for the week. Will you help quiet the neighbors if they ask what’s going on? I don’t want them to find out and tell him.”

“Absolutely. I’ll tell Shirley to help, too.”

“Thank you, William. You both have been so good to me.”

“You got money to go? I got money to give ya. Help you get down the road far enough we can’t see your lights no more.” He winked at her playfully.

“I’ve been saving money for a while, now. But thank you.” Nancy kissed William on the cheek and started back in the house to get another load.
“How long will it be ‘til Brandon gets here, Nancy?” William asked as she walked up the porch stairs.

“He’ll be maybe one more hour, maybe less. He drives like his father when he’s excited.”

“All right then, I’ll let Shirley know.”

In the house, Nancy looked at everything she would need to pack and decided that she didn’t want it all. She only wanted what she had to have to survive and maybe the sentimental things—like Brandon’s school pictures, and photos of her parents. She packed until she was tired again, which didn’t take long, and she sat in Hank’s recliner and smoked one of Hank’s cigars. Because she could. And every inhalation was lavender bliss. The room filled with smoke and it was hazy, like the fog that lifts over the Scioto River in the mornings and fills the hills with uncertainty. Nancy heard a car door and she opened the storm door to see out. She didn’t recognize the car he was driving, but she recognized the tin cup hanging from the rearview mirror and she recognized her son.
FRAGILE: THIS SIDE UP

It had taken Gladys two weeks to tell me the stories of Jill Sanders, Hannah Mitchel, Eliza Cable, Vinny Hatfield, Melissa Jones, and Nancy Roe. I had a black three-ring binder that I kept loose-leaf notebook paper in and kept plastic across it as a splash guard while Gladys was cooking. She told the stories with such emotion and detail that I became sucked into the worlds of all of the women. When I lie in bed at night, I imagine what it would be like to be a daughter to each one of them. Some of them I was more hopeful about than others, if I’m being truly honest. Sometimes I would dream vividly about their lives, as if I were there the day Jill’s husband shot their dog in front of their daughter, or went back with Eliza to Breakfast Land to find the little boy she left. I once dreamed I was walking with Hannah through the fairground, and she knew her way around better than I did, despite the fact that I spent one week every summer there catching up with friends. I even thought of Vinny when I went to take my car to have the oil changed. I was in a constant state of imagination and curiosity.

Momma and Daddy knew that I was up to something and I’d tell them soon enough. But for now, the only next step I could think of was to look through my mother’s photo albums. Surely she would have left a picture of her best friend in one of them, and perhaps something in the picture would tell me for sure.

My mother kept her photo albums in her office on the bottom of one of her book cases. There were nine; most of them were baby pictures of me and wedding photos of her and Daddy. I’d never looked through all of their wedding photos before. I had only passed the ones hanging in the hallway and admired Momma’s dress and how beautiful
she looked with her hair down and large black ringlet curls falling down her back. She had baby’s breath around her head like a halo, and her smile was so large I could count her teeth. Daddy’s jacket was a size too small and he was squeezed in it. His hair was bushy and combed over. It was a mark of being “trendy and cool” in his time, Daddy said. But there were never any other pictures displayed with other people in them and now I had a sneaking suspicion I knew why.

In their wedding album I found pictures I had never seen before. Grandma dancing in the front yard in a checkered polyester dress and grandpa asleep in the swing with a whiskey bottle. He looked like he had a rough day. Giving away your baby girl can’t be easy. Several pages in I found a picture that was folded over so that someone was hidden. I quickly peeled the thin plastic back from it and pulled out the picture. There were no names on the back but when I unfolded it, there was a woman in a purple dress with a bouquet of flowers. She looked as if she’d been a bridesmaid for Momma. She had her hair pinned up and I couldn’t see the color of it. She didn’t really resemble me, but why would Momma fold the picture over? Maybe it was a friend who Momma wasn’t friends with anymore. I kept searching.

It took me three hours to go through most of the picture albums and I didn’t see any other pictures that were of people I didn’t know. When I reached the last picture album, it felt hopeless. The last picture album I came to was of my baby pictures. It contained pictures of both sets of my grandparents holding me and Momma and Daddy bringing me home from the hospital. Momma must have documented every moment of my life. Under each picture was written a major milestone: Aby rolled over, Aby pushed
herself up, Aby sleeping in her crib. There was nothing about these that felt like major milestones. They were all stories I had heard about before. Then halfway through the album was a picture that said “Aby—16 days old.” What was so special about the day I was 16 days old? Why this day? As if new mothers needed a reason to take pictures of their newborn children. I studied the picture hard. I didn’t recognize the yard they were standing in. Momma was in blue jeans and a pin-tucked white shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail. Daddy was looking down the road in the picture. He wasn’t even smiling. So who took the picture? It didn’t say where they were or who they were with.

I studied every inch of the picture. I recognized nothing. I was in a bonnet, and my eyes were open. I looked happy. The sun was out. There were no clouds in the sky. There was a car parked in the driveway. Maybe Momma and Daddy had bought a new car that day and were taking my picture with it. And that’s when I saw it and I knew.

Hanging from the rearview mirror of the car in the picture was a tin cup.

Keys jingling, dog barking, time passing. Someone was at the front door. I couldn’t collect my thoughts enough to have a conversation, so I took the picture from the photo album and stuck it in my pocket. I ran up the stairs to my room and locked the door.

I cried until my eyes were sore. I punched my pillow and then screamed into it. As I listened to all of Gladys’ stories and wrote down every detail in search of my biological mother, I had hoped my mother wasn’t Nancy. Not because I didn’t like Nancy. She was a strong woman. A woman any girl could be proud of having for a
mother. But now I knew how I was created. She was pregnant with me the day she left Hank and that meant that I was conceived in rape. Hank was a rapist and a murderer. He killed people. How can I be half him? I was so focused on who my mother was I had never thought about who my biological father. It’s no wonder she didn’t want me. My God, I was a reminder. I was the product of her pain. Every time I thought about it, I cried harder—the cry that comes from deep down in you and comes out silently. The cry that leaves you breathless.

I stood in the shower trying to wash away the pain with hot water and steam.

The birds were flocking and there was no door to open to let them out.
THE THINGS WE KEEP

His eyes haunt me each time I look in the mirror. After looking up his mug-shot on the internet, I realized my sea-foam green eyes came from Hank Roe. My mother was right: my hair is Nancy’s, my nose and high cheekbones, my height, the build of my body—all Nancy’s. But I got his eyes. The same eyes that looked into Nancy’s and offered no remorse and gave no mercy while raping her. The same eyes that, while waiting to be sentenced, stared down the families of twelve victims that he’d hit along the side of the road—his. His eyes probably never cried a tear, and yet, in the last two days I’ve cried enough for both of us.

They say it takes seven days for a newborn baby’s eyes to change from the color they were born with to the color they will keep. I imagine that on the seventh day Nancy saw them and knew that they would be a reminder of the life she was trying to leave behind. So she chose not to keep me. I get it. I understand. In a way, I love that I know the reason she was able to give me away. I feel no hurt towards her anymore. I feel hurt for her but not towards her. And she was kind enough to me to find me an excellent adoptive mother replacement. But it doesn’t keep me from wanting to dig my fingernails down in the quick of my skin to pull out the DNA that’s his.

Momma knew that I knew when I asked if I could get color contacts lenses.

“Why do you want contact lenses? You don’t even wear glasses.” She never raised her eyes from the papers she was grading to make contact with me.

“Because if I ever see her, I don’t want her to see them.” That’s when she dropped the pen and lowered her glasses to see me.
“She loves your eyes.”

“I’m sure that she doesn’t. In fact, I know that she doesn’t because they are his. You’ve not lied to me ever before. Please don’t start now.” I had never been so forthcoming with her. I needed her to talk to me as a woman. Not as her daughter. Not as a charity case that she was trying to save. I wanted her to see me as a woman who was trying to ease the suffering of another woman.

“How do you know about him?”

“I found a picture of you and Daddy beside a car in your photo album, dated the day you brought me home. The car had a tin cup hanging in the rearview mirror and Gladys told me a story of a woman named Nancy Roe who had a tin cup from her grandfather and left her husband because he raped her. I know that the husband’s name was Hank Roe and that he was sentenced to life in prison with no parole for killing twelve hitchhikers. She was your friend and you were trying to help her. I understand. But I have his eyes.”

I tried to stay strong as I presented her with what I knew, but my feelings go the better of me. “I don’t want to have his eyes, Momma.”

She stood up and held my head to her chest. Her hands enveloped my face. The harder I wept, the tighter she held me. There was nothing in her arms that made me believe she would ever let me go.

In the kitchen of the restaurant, Gladys waited on the tables and I did the short order cooking on the grill. We switched places for the day so I didn’t have people asking
me why I looked upset. I wasn’t in the mood to answer questions. I just wanted a day of being hidden and collecting my thoughts. Gladys would come back and repeat to me every order. I felt bad that she was going back and forth so much, but she insisted. She felt guilty because she had told me the story that changed my life and “let the birds in.” I told her not to be sorry but she couldn’t help it any more than I could be sorry for asking.

I made three hamburgers with extra pickle, two orders of biscuits and gravy, a hot dog with extra sauce, and a western omelet, before a ticket came up on the conveyor belt.

“Meet me at storage unit 403 at 7 p.m.”

I snatched the order from the string and peered around the order window. Gladys stood smiling.

“Did you write this, Gladys?”

“Girl. You just writ down eight stories ‘cause you know I can’t write.”

“I have to go, Gladys.”

“I reckon you do.” Gladys smiled at me and her cheeks blushed as I hugged her.

It was 6:39 p.m. when I looked at my watch. I called Mindy, the other evening waitress. She said to go ahead and go, that she was on her way. My fingers fumbled nervously and pulled my grill-cook apron tie into a knot. Gladys untangled me.

I left the apron on the counter and ran to the door. The parking lot was already dark and I pressed the unlock button on my keys to illuminate the lights on my car. I got in the car and sat there for a moment. My heart was pounding. I could hear myself breathing. Everything my body was supposed to do without me noticing, I noticed. My fingers twitched as I texted Momma.
She wants to meet me at unit 403 at 7.

I know. Drive carefully, please.

I caught every stoplight on the way. Every woman in the cars going past me looked like an older version of Nancy. Every song on the radio sang a ballad perfect for the moment. And the gravel driveway leading down into the storage unit yard was just barely long enough for me to catch my breath as I caught a glimpse of her standing by her truck.

She was wearing black rain boots and a ruffled neon pink gypsy skirt. Her black t-shirt had neon pink writing that said “Vote yes, Florida! Save the Manatees!” Her hair was long and pulled into a ponytail. I was greasy from the night’s work and was hoping I didn’t stink.

I pulled behind her pickup and she shielded her eyes with her arm from my headlights.


“Abygale,” she said, as she nodded my way. “I hear you might have some questions for me?”

I refused to look at her. I looked everywhere but at her face. “Did my mother tell you this?”

“She did. She tells me about your week every Friday when I call her.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I talk to her every Friday and she tells me about your week.”

“You talk to her on the phone every Friday?”
I hadn’t anticipated ever being mad at Nancy but for some reason the idea that she had communicated for so long with my mother and wanted the details of my life but not the relationship struck me as hurtful.

“I do. I gave birth to you. I care.”

“Then why didn’t you ever ask to talk to me? You could’ve talked to me without seeing me.” I ran my hands through my hair and rested my hand across my mouth, feeling like my words were getting the better of me.

“I didn’t want you to ever know.”

“I knew when I could understand that some things you get from each parent and nothin’ I got looks like Momma or Daddy.”

“Your mother told me this day would come. I didn’t believe her.” She picked at her thumb with her forefingers. “I didn’t think you were angry at me, though.”

I took a deep breath. I knew I wasn’t really mad at her. It was just coming out that way.

“I’m not mad at you, Nancy. I’m really not. The whole way here I worked up a speech to tell you about how I’m so sorry that my father hurt you. I’m so sorry that you went through the pain that you did. I’ve never been mad at you. I feel bad for you.”

“You mean you pity me,” Nancy said.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Abygale said.

“Don’t pity me, Abygale. I’m free.”
She walked toward me. I could see her rain-boots moving and I could hear the gravel crunching beneath them. Her rough-skinned hand lifted my chin until her eyes looked deep into mine. “What a gorgeous young woman you’ve become.”

I’d never met her, but I embraced her. I never knew her, but for a moment, I loved her. She smelled like cheap apple-cinnamon air-freshener. Her hair was wiry in between my fingers as I hugged her. I felt her hand put something in the pocket of my jacket.

“I have to go.” She appeared to be crying but managed those words as she turned and walked away. I didn’t ask her to stay I knew she had already spent too much of her life staying when she needed to go. So I watched her drive away as I rubbed the cold metal key in my pocket.

The next day I went back to the storage unit. It was too dark to look in the night before and I didn’t have a flashlight. Momma went with me, although I felt like she had a sneaking suspicion of what was in there. We pulled into the parking lot, just as I had the day before. It was light out this time and I could see each door number. I recognized the numbers of all of the women Gladys had told me stories about. I passed Jill Sanders’ and wondered about her daughter Lilly. I passed Hannah Mitchel’s and wondered what a blind woman would keep in a storage unit—maybe the black hoodie she wore to hide her red hair. I secretly hoped when I passed Eliza Cable’s unit that perhaps there was a large stack of plastic pancake-playground equipment in there. My imagination let me believe that in Vinny Hatfield’s there was a yellow prom dress caked in motor oil. But my heart
sank as we passed Melissa Jones’ because I knew it was full of baby stuff that she never got to use. A mother that wanted a child when others were giving them away for free.

We stopped at 403. We got out and stuck the key in the lock. It was a perfect fit. I took the lock out of the metal rings, shifted the door handle, and lifted the door upwards while listening to the metal on metal whistle and squeal. It slid to the ceiling and the string hung down. Inside the unit was a coffee table stacked with wrapped presents, photo albums, and the tin cup. Curled and standing straight up inside the tin cup was a letter to me from her.

To Abygale Rose:

I was older when I had you. I had a grown son and I didn’t want you to have a mother that couldn’t run with you in the park or shop all day for that perfect dress. I wanted you to have a mother that could do those things. You are beautiful and she has done a good job raising you.

You’ll notice the photo album contains people you’ve never met—I wanted to make sure you had pictures if you want them. One is of your grandmother. (Yes, your father’s mother). You have HER green eyes. And she was a beautiful woman, too.

I will meet with you and talk, but your mother will always be your mother. I will be your friend. ~Nancy

I let my mother read the letter once I was through. She sat on the edge of the car, wiping away stray tears from underneath her glasses. I could tell that she missed Nancy and was grateful she had done this for me. The world may not know what it’s like to feel
complete. But being whole is possible. It overtakes you. It makes you feel like the world is yours—as if it can fit inside a tin cup.

I found myself in a storage unit: a once-empty metal carton that someone had moved out of in order to let someone else in. A container with a cement floor that held things that held memories for someone other than me. I was something locked away. Until I opened the door and set me free.