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NOT ABOUT ME: A MEMOIR

by

Candice Renee Baxter

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

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A rebellious teenage girl with driving bravado and Southern manners gets pregnant and married—in that order—her senior year of high school, class of 1998. Through cinematic scenes like a shotgun wedding, struggling marriage, single motherhood, college, and business career, the feisty narrator builds tension up to a climax. This is not just another triumphant story of teenage pregnancy set deep in the heart of the Bible belt.

Not About Me: A Memoir is an approximately 47,000 word book-length example of what happens ten years later when young parents grow in separate directions but maintain a relationship for the child. After I have put her first in all my life's major decisions for a decade and achieve my goal of success in the city, my daughter asks to live with her father in the small town where it all began. This is a narrative account of letting her go.

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WHITE OAK BRIDGE

When Josh hit the gas, the tires ground into the fist-sized gravel and slung up mud like rooster tails, cutting ruts across the shallow end of White Oak Creek. We crossed the bridge and pulled down the dirt road in his red Chevy pick-up. Only the four-wheel drives with suspension lift kits and alligator treads made it back from the deep side around the bend. The creek branched off in veins from North Tennessee on its way to Kentucky Lake, pooling here and there in warm spots good for catching minnows. The rock bed was rough enough to need shoes, but the hundred-year-old oaks across the water lent shade in the afternoon sun. A fine dust path wove back into the woods through the flat land. On lazy Sundays, people came from miles around to the swimming hole where folks pulled out their coolers and cranked up some old Hank and jumped off the bridge. The water ran so clear you couldn't tell how far down the pebbles lay.

My ten-year-old daughter Ali bounced around with me in the back of her father's truck. "Are you gonna' jump, Mom?"

"Maybe." I didn't need to be doing anything stupid, breaking any bones.

As we pulled down the hill, a teenage girl in a tie-died bathing suit tossed up her cowboy hat, hollered out a yee-haw, and lunged off the bridge into the water. I used to be that girl. Before motherhood settled me down, I was a good-timing, rule-breaking, golden-haired filly with a wild streak a country mile wide. If somebody told me I couldn't do something, well that just made me want to do it faster. I put my Momma and Daddy through hell, God love them, and now that I was a parent, I sure didn't want to pay for my raising.

From the main road, the bridge looked like an ordinary one-lane highway viaduct, except for the people in blue jean cut-offs and white sneakers gathered along the edge, looking over the side rail. Made of washed aggregate, it was notched like a castle all the way across. Two thick concrete anchor beams supported the deck running from bank to bank—a gray man-made structure planted in the middle of natural green and muddy brown and sky blue. The beams were weathered, covered in graffiti by Billy Bo Jack, Dilbert, and Mouse + Jennifer 4ever. Dark stains on the bottom supports told that the creek was down about eight feet lower than usual.

Josh picked a spot where the cool water ran waist high. He backed his truck to the water a little ways down from a group of teenage boys singing, “You don’t have to call me darlin’, Darlin’.” We dropped the tailgate and loaded out.

Though Josh and I had been divorced for years, it almost seemed like a family vacation, the first and only our daughter Ali would ever remember. She was two when we split up, when I left the small town for wide open spaces and more opportunity than Paris, Tennessee could offer. I had raised her in Memphis on my own for the last seven years, working two jobs and finishing college. But her real hero was her daddy.

Every other weekend, since he was able, Josh met me at Casey Jones Village in Jackson, under the big red caboose. Hoisted sixty-feet in the air on steel railroad supports, you can see it from the Interstate, the half-way point between our two homes. Usually, Josh brought his girlfriend and I brought my fiancé and we’d all go somewhere for Sunday supper. Ali picked where she wanted to sit, no jealousy, no penalties. We all gathered around the table asking about family members and science projects and upcoming sports schedules, synchronizing our calendars.

But this time was different. Instead of meeting half way to make the switch and go back in our separate directions, I drove the whole way back to my hometown. Tall enough for the front seat, Ali laid back and read *The Secret Garden*. She placed the open book on her knee and looked at me.

“How old were you when you lived with Papa?”

“The first time? Sixth grade.” I counted. “I was twelve.”

“How come you only stayed for a year?”

“Because I missed my mother. And the city.” I knew what was coming. “Why?”

“Do you think maybe when I’m twelve, I can try living with Daddy?”

~

I married Josh when I was seventeen, a decade ago, for the obvious reason. He was a young hired farmhand, and I was a feisty, rebel child who always dared to do the wrong thing. The whole world disappeared when we were together. I loved Josh as hard and strong as I knew how. But what do you know about life at seventeen? If you would’ve asked me then, I’d have known everything.

We planned to live forever on God and love and raise a family until we spent our days in rocking chairs on the front porch. Sometimes it winds up that way. But we grew in different directions.

Ten years later, I had established a life in Memphis—a job in finance, a nice apartment in a good school district, and a chair on the PTA board. My fiancé was a military pilot out on a short mission, due home the next week for our wedding. He agreed it was a good thing for Ali to spend a little time with both of her parents together

before she officially gained a step-dad. So the weekend before I got married again, I rode out to White Oak Bridge with my daughter and her father.

“We come here all the time in the summer,” she said like a tour guide explaining a foreign land. I knew all about swimming holes and jumping off bridges, but she had never seen *my* wild country side. Ali knew college student mom and business executive mom and never-ending laundry mom, but she had no idea I used to be the girl in the tie-dyed bathing suit.

“Really?” I played along.

“I’ve jumped off the bridge before, twice. You wanna try?”

I rustled through the cooler and pulled out a beer. “In a little while, honey.”

“Hey Earl, watch this ‘un!” A shirtless man with a mullet climbed up on the rail and handed his drink to the man behind him. He attempted a swan dive, but it looked more like the funky chicken, upside down.

“What an idiot,” I said.

“I’ve done that before and busted my head open,” Josh said.

“Oh, sorry,” I didn’t try to hide my smile.

“No, it was stupid. I know,” he shook his head, “and I sure won’t do it again.”

He unfolded a couple of canvas camping chairs. He lodged the plastic legs into the pebbled creek bed, where the water ran ankle deep down stream from the swimming hole. “This way you can keep cool.”

“You need sunscreen,” I yelled as she started off.

“I’m gonna swing off the rope over there,” she pointed to a tree on the other side where other kids lined up and splashed in.

“I hope you do,” I shook a plastic bottle. “But you need sunscreen first. Come over here.” I coated her with SPF 30 and wiped my hands on a towel. Water washing over her feet, she sat in the chair until I declared the lotion had set long enough to be waterproof. “Alright, go ahead.”

“Stay where I can see you,” Josh called after her.

Ali swam across to the other side of the creek where a group of kids climbed up the bank. A muddy path led around a massive tree trunk to a homemade swing of thick, knotted rope slung and tied over a sturdy branch. We had raised her to be independent, to make friends and choices on her own. When it was her turn and the rope didn’t swing back close enough for her to catch it, she didn’t ask the taller boys for help. She looked around and found a long stick, pulled the rope in, and swooshed out over the water. Ali squealed when she let go.

I sat in the canvas chair letting the cool current run over my ankles. My toenail polish matched my pink skirt and bikini. Along the bank, families gathered in groups, grilling hotdogs and throwing back a few beers. Kids with orange swimmies inflated on their arms giggled and splashed. Ali swung from the rope again.

Josh leaned against the tailgate, propped his cowboy hat back on his head. Cheap sunglasses hid his eyes, and a dip of snuff bulged under his lip. He looked exactly the same, but thirty years old—rounder, loose in places. With his sturdy frame, Josh could build a house from the ground up, but never cared anything about college. And there’s not a damn thing wrong with that. My daddy worked a blue-collar job all his life. I’m proud of my backwoods Southern roots, but I wanted something, not more but different.

After I divorced him and moved Ali to Memphis, Josh turned to pills and poker and skanks. He quit his job and became the dead-beat dad who never showed up like he promised. He missed Ali's third birthday. By ten o'clock when he didn't call, I had to tear her from the spot where she waited on the front steps of the small guest house I rented.

"No, my daddy's coming to get me!" she screamed.

"It's ok baby, I'll wake you up when he gets here." I stroked her fine white hair.

She fought with her little fists, and when she had cried herself tired, I put her to bed in her new princess gown. I curled up next to her in the twin bed and steadied my breathing to hers. When her leg twitched, I slid my arm from under her pillow, slow like the tooth fairy.

Alone in my room, I called my friends and canceled everything. It was my birthday, too—my twenty first. In front of my mirror, all decked out for my first legal night out, I cussed Josh up one side and down the other. I wished him dead.

Ali only remembers the teddy bear smiling at her from my car the next morning. She kept the Barbie card, even though she hated Barbie. Scrawled in black pen, Josh apologized for not making it on time, but he promised to always be there for her. Love, Dad. Over the next year, he drifted in and out of her life. Sometimes he would show like he said, sometimes not. I quit asking for child support because money talk made him disappear for months. In the closet by the back door, I kept her overnight bag loaded with clean clothes and only mentioned he was coming when I saw him pull in the driveway.

Quiet so Ali couldn't hear me, I cursed his whole existence into my pillow at night, but never in front of her. She worshipped her daddy, her hero of the whole world. And every girl needs a hero.

~

When Josh pulled his shirt over his head, I saw the same old bull rider tattoo on his bicep, the outline of a bucking cowboy I had kissed as a girl. An unfamiliar scar on his chest—a sunburst shined on his skin and a healed incision traced down his abdomen. I had not seen his bare torso since we split. At twenty-six, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, treatable, but it spread. He finally quit cigarettes after four months of treatment and a threat from his doctor to stop everything if the blood tests showed any trace of nicotine whatsoever. Josh prayed and quoted scripture to anyone who would listen until the chemo kept him bedridden. The day his mother asked if she could take Ali to the hospital for one last visit before the bone marrow transplant, I hesitated.

“The doctor told him to get his affairs in order,” his mother sobbed.

“I don't know if she's strong enough to see him in that hospital bed, all covered in tubes and hooked up to machines.”

“Please, Candice. He really needs her right now.” I recognized a mother's desperation in her raspy voice.

Heartless as it sounds, I wasn't worried about him. I wanted to protect my own baby from hurting. But if she lost her daddy, and never said goodbye, Ali would never forgive me. When I picked her up after the visit, I tried to keep things light.

“So how's your dad?” I asked, like he had a cold.

“Good. He lost his hair, but that’s ok because now he doesn’t have to shave.” She looked up at me with her bright smile. “He told me not to worry. I’m the reason he’s fighting.”

As the sunset turned the bridge into bright pillars of amber, leafy shadows crept across the water. We watched Ali float in the current with a group of friends she’d made at the rope swing. Josh and I sipped our beers and talked about old friends—what they were doing now, how time had changed people.

I took off my sunglasses so he could see my eyes. “On the way up here, Ali asked me if she could come live with you. Just for a year to see what it’s like.”

Josh shifted from one leg to the other. “What do you think about that?”

“What do you think?” It was like old times, when neither of us wanted to say it first.

“I’d love to have her.” He wiped his forehead. “Gimme’ some time to save up.”

“It wouldn’t be till next year, sixth grade. She has to change schools anyway.” I took a deep breath and held it while another person plunged into the creek. I exhaled. “It’s a lotta work. Think you can handle it?”

“Question is, can you handle it?”

“I don’t know.” I stretched my arms and stood up. “It might do her some good to get out of the city, have room to run.”

“You really serious about this?” He looked over the water at her blond head drifting our way. “I’d be tickled to death to get the chance to raise my little girl, make my mark, you know.” At ten years old, she still followed her daddy around like a puppy dog.

“Before she gets all chocked full of hormones and spite, yellin’, ‘You just don’t understand!’” I stepped back and laughed. “Remember how I was with Daddy?”

“I definitely want her before all that starts.”

“Well, I’m not sayin’ one way or the other.” I didn’t know if I was strong enough to give her away. “I just wanted to talk about the possibility.”

“Hey, Mom and Dad.” Ali sprung up from the creek and wiped her eyes. “That sounds so weird–Mom and Dad.” She pulled on our arms. “Let’s go jump off the bridge.”

“I better not,” I held back. “You two go on.”

“Come on, Daddy.” She pranced off with him trudging behind.

As I watched Josh climb the hill toward the bridge, I counted the years he had been in remission–three and a half. Because of the radiation, he can never have any more children. Every other weekend since Ali can remember, her daddy has picked her up under that big red caboose. He put over 100,000 miles on that Chevy pick-up, driving to Memphis for school programs and choir performances and softball games.

But he could never be the parent I was. Josh didn’t wake her for the bus every morning or cook supper before bath time or help with homework on school nights. He knew nothing about daily vitamins or eight-thirty bedtimes or PTA fundraisers. She was mine. I had fashioned her with my work ethic and hygiene and good manners while Josh got to be fun, weekend dad. When they reached the top of the hill, I refused to sit and watch.

I walked over by the truck, set my beer down, and let my pink skirt fall to the ground. When she saw me coming up the path in my designer bathing suit, Ali bounced

up and down. She grabbed her daddy's hand, and pulled him out of line. They waited for me. When we reached the front, I looked over the edge; two stories looked a lot farther down from here. I understood why it had taken everyone so long.

Josh helped Ali over the rail and offered to help me.

"I can do it myself." I sat on the hot concrete, swung my legs over, looked down, and swung them back. "You go first."

The water held no reflection, just a translucent window to a flat bottom. But common sense said the creek bed was not flat—shallow along the banks and deep in the middle. What about branches or sharp rocks or the overhang of concrete just below the rail? I had to propel myself out, so as not to scrape my skin, and break the water's surface with my feet. It was a long way down, the slightest head tilt could change my angle. Once I jumped, there was no changing things.

Like a mentor, Josh pointed to a spot toward the middle. He slipped off his shoes one at a time and dropped them down—plop, plop. He made a show of stiffening his body, pinched his nose, and jumped feet first. I watched him fall. Seconds passed before he hit the water.

"Did ya' see? Do it just like that." Josh floated on his back downstream and caught his shoes.

I stood bare toes to precipice with my daughter on White Oak Bridge. She turned to me and asked, "Mom, will you jump if I do?"

SHIPPED TO A MAP DOT

One fall Friday night in 1973, a group of teenagers parked by the main strip in the Kroger Grocery parking lot in Paris, Tennessee because there's nothing better to do in Hicktown, USA but get cleaned up and come to town. Momma had just gotten off work from her after school job at the feed mill, and she was supposed to go straight home. But her girlfriend, and ride, Sharon leaned against the back of yellow and black pinstriped muscle car, talking to friends set up on someone's tailgate.

Momma wore her coffee-brown hair parted down the middle. It waved loose, thick and dusting her shoulders. One of those girls who looked best in a tank top and jeans, she didn't wear much make-up. Her mother said it looked trashy. But Momma didn't need to line her hazel eyes to make them stand out. Her high cheek bones and pronounced brow framed them in a natural beauty. Old enough to know how to use them, she made eyes at Daddy when he bellowed to a stop.

Daddy custom built his Harley chopper with high sissy handle bars made of twisted chrome and psychedelic orange triangles painted on the gas tanks, a shade darker than his shaggy hair and sideburns. Before he turned off the engine, he gave it a good, deep rev. Daddy put down the kick stand, unassed his steel horse, and pocketed the key in his boot-cut Levis. He took off his helmet and he smoothed his hair down on the sides. Daddy had bright blue eyes and freckles on his arms from hauling hay all summer. He was a couple of years out of school; he worked for the Natural Gas Company with his daddy.

“How ‘bout a ride, Ronnie Green?” Sharon knew how to use her eyes too, and her boobs. Word around was she knew how to use more than that.

A good church-going girl, still a virgin at sixteen, Momma didn’t offer up tail for free rides. She knew Daddy ran with a tough crowd, but she’d never heard anything bad about him in particular. Sharon bounced and begged. Momma stood back and looked at the ground.

“A’yight.” Daddy pointed to Momma. “But only if your friend’ll go for a ride next.”

“Please, Judy?” Sharon bounced and begged again.

“I don’t know.” If her momma and daddy found out she’d climbed on the back of a motorcycle with a man, not a boy from school, but a man five years older, they’d have a fit. “Okay, but not too far.”

When it was Momma’s turn, she held onto Daddy’s waist and kept a two-finger distance between her crotch and his body, even when he broke hard pulling into Sonic. That’s how he knew she was a keeper.

Two years later, Momma married Daddy for freedom, to get out from under her controlling parents. Daddy married Momma for something to hold on to. His father died of a massive coronary at forty-five, hunched over on the tractor cutting hay in the back field.

They said their “I do’s” in the biggest church in Paris. Momma wore a dress her mother made. Daddy donned a baby blue tuxedo, complete with ruffled shirt and matching bowtie. They smiled and clung to each other.

After two kids and six years of marriage, Momma didn't feel so free. Daddy spent most of his time away, not cheating or drinking or gambling away our grocery money, but working in the garage. He sold the Harley and put all his attention to fixing up his father's old farm truck. If his mother needed anything, Daddy would come running. But Momma spent most nights alone, feeding and bathing and tucking us in.

When I was two, they broke clean. Daddy stayed in Paris, paid Momma for half of the house, and helped us move into university housing at UT Martin a few hours away. They both married again and divorced again. I got a little sister out of Momma's second marriage. When it ended, my brother went to live with daddy, and we three girls moved to Memphis. Through it all, Momma and Daddy put their differences aside and got along for the sake of the children, so I grew up with a foot in two cultures.

When Daddy picked me up for every other weekend visits, he drove the '48-his pearl blue Chevy street-rod truck with the chrome grill and roaring tail pipes. Momma always said she was a widow to that truck, but I loved the attention. Folks pointed and waved as we left the city for the two lane highway taking us north to Kentucky Lake, traffic thinned. Life slowed down.

I spent all weekend playing with cousins, fishing off of the wood plank dock or picking blackberries from the sticker bush up the hill from Grandma's house. After a couple of days, I packed my bag and stared out the window as the tall pines zoomed past, until they were almost gone and buildings took their places.

In the city, I was the poorest of the rich kids, the smart girl who tried too hard to be cool-which automatically meant I wasn't. With little money for clothes, I cut the little blue Keds emblems off my out-grown shoes and glued them on the backs of my Dollar

Store sneakers. I used fabric paint to write “Banana Republic” on my plain t-shirts. Mom worked late nights to afford our apartment in the good school district, so everyday, I got off the bus and let myself in with the house key I wore on a pink shoe lace tied around my neck. I locked myself inside the empty apartment until Mom came home—just in time to feed me dinner, check my homework, and tuck me in. We survived on microwave fish sticks and red Kool Aid and deep conversations, which usually ended with us comforting each other.

One Sunday, during the hand-off, I dropped the bomb. “I wanna go live with Daddy.”

At Daddy’s, I never had to take my vitamins or fold the towels or go to bed on time. I didn’t have to worry about fashion trends—everybody I saw bought clothes from the biggest store in town, Wal-Mart. I liked the idea of living down the road from all my family: riding jet skis and four-wheelers to any given cousin’s house, helping Grandma make peanut brittle, and sleeping with the windows open to hear the crickets.

My parents spent hours on the phone talking about my future. In the summer of 1991, I turned eleven. Momma helped me pack all of my clothes, trinkets and books into empty liquor store boxes. Daddy drove to the whole way to Memphis in his silver pick-up and loaded my things into the truck bed, flush against the cab. Standing in misty rain, Mom didn’t cry when I kissed her cheek and told her I would still see her every other weekend. But as we rode away, I looked out the back glass and saw her head buried in her hands.

I only lasted a year with Daddy before I wanted to go home. He strictly enforced daily bed making, homework before television, and post-dinner dish duty. We had

supper at the table every night, but Daddy wasn't much for conversation. "Less talking, more eating," he'd say.

Surrounded by family, everyone knew my business. Boys at school fought over who got to sit next to me at lunch, while their longtime girlfriends plotted in whispers but smiled to my face. I had landed in the middle of a net, knots tied closely by years of growing up together. Again I did not fit, and Daddy gave no advice. I needed my mother. After school let out for the summer, Daddy held no hard feelings when he packed me up and moved me back to Memphis.

~

A month before I turned thirteen, we had "the accident." That's what everyone called it because the nineteen-year-old girl in her black Honda never slowed down, just didn't see the stop sign. She never meant to hurt us. Momma was driving. My little sister had called shotgun. She was five years younger than me, but fair was fair, so I took the back and sprawled across the seat to read my school library book. Along the winding two-lane road, we passed acres and acres of fields fenced off in squares. A dilapidated old country store sat boarded up at an intersection. A yellow light flashed in our direction; a red light flashing for the crossroad.

Momma broke her arm, what they call a pilot's fracture—from pulling back so hard on the stick just before impact. We t-boned the other car, spun around, and crashed into a tree. Our bodies crunched inside the pale blue Nissan Sentra. No airbags, no seatbelts. Momma's face left a dent in the windshield, and the steering wheel twisted like an unveiling flower. My sister folded safely in the front floor board, only breaking her leg in one place. Momma broke more bones than you can count on both hands. When

she looked back at me, she didn't know if I was alive or dead, with so much brain matter exposed.

On first impact, the plastic piece that holds the front passenger shoulder harness popped off. When we hit the tree, my head collided with the exposed bolt. It crushed my skull and right eye socket. My right leg caught under the front seat and broke at the shin. The edges of the pages of *The Good Earth* were spattered with blood.

I came to when my sister started wailing. "I want my daddy. I want my daddy."

Even when the firemen had pulled them out and Momma held Rachel Jayne, propped her up on the broken arm, my sister wouldn't stop calling for her father. She whined in drawn out moans, closer and louder than the sirens. I couldn't scream at her to shut up, like an alarm clock I couldn't move to turn off. All I wanted was to drift off to sleep. But she wouldn't let me.

"I want my daddy. I want my daddy." Sometimes I wonder if her big mouth saved my life.

I came to enough to sit up when the paramedics pulled me out. I didn't know how bad off I was, just that my right eye wouldn't open, and my forehead had gone numb. I reached up with my fingers and felt gushy slime like macaroni and cheese. Warm blood ran down my face and the world started to go dark. As they loaded me onto the gurney and cut off my clothes, I felt embarrassed knowing I had forgotten to put on panties.

"I fractured my right tibia," I said. In science class the week before, I had learned the names of major bones.

"Hey, Roger. This girl just diagnosed herself," the EMT hollered to her partner. She kept me awake for the rest of the ambulance ride, quizzing me over the bones of the

body. I shivered in shock, but responded with each touch, “Fibula, Femur, Radius, Ulna.” I wiggled my carpals and metacarpals.

At LeBohner Children’s Hospital in Memphis, the orthopedist set my leg as I told Branch Dividian Compound jokes about David Coresh fitting in the ashtray of a Volkswagen. As a nurse cleaned my face, I vomited all the blood that had run down my throat, all over her and the white commercial tile floor.

“I’m so sorry.” I didn’t mean to.

She dropped her sponge and rag and ran off apologizing back to me, saying she just couldn’t handle it. I didn’t understand, couldn’t see my eyelid severed in two, flapped open the door of a wigwam.

In the operating room, Dr. George L. Burruss made the first incision. He slit me from ear to ear atop my crown and pulled the skin forward down to my nose. The ophthalmologist removed shards of bone, pieced together my eye socket, and restored my sight. Dr. Burruss, a reconstructive surgeon, moved in and repaired my skull with titanium plates, small shapes like pieces of an erector set—H, L, and one the curve of an eyebrow. Because I was still growing, my bone would enclose over the plates, making them part of me. They are not magnetic. I have never set off any metal detector at the airport.

Daddy had gone down to the races at Talladega with a group from the Elks Lodge. He returned to an answering machine message from Grandma that I had been in an accident, no details. He jumped in his pick-up and drove 162 miles from the top of Tennessee to the bottom, not knowing how bad his baby girl was hurt. I woke up in

recovery with him by my side. My daddy was so strong, he never cried, at least not in front of me.

When Momma came days later, all bruised and casted and swollen, Grandma told her to be strong. I didn't know how bad I looked. No one would let me see a mirror. But I saw it in Momma's face as soon as she walked in. She was trying to force back tears.

I laid my hand on hers. "Don't cry, Momma. It's not your fault. It was an accident."

A year later, Dr. Burruss operated again and removed the L plate. My skull had filled in underneath, instead of fusing around it. He also needed more skin to repair scar tissue, so he put two saline implants under my scalp. Every week, I visited his office and took off my ball cap, and he injected more solution into the balloons on my head. My skin regenerated enough in four months to have the implants removed, allowing for more facial reconstruction.

After the third surgery, Grandma gently combed out the clumps of blood. I was thirteen and had begged them not to shave my head again. Only thirty-two staples this time. There was a narrow strip of stubble like the single pass of a lawnmower across my incision. All around it, my tangled brown hair lay matted for days until I had recovered enough for the first wash. Grandma took me into her bathroom with the recessed Jacuzzi tub. I lay on the carpet with a towel under my neck as she poured cups of warm, soapy water, loosened the dried blood with her fingers, and tediously combed for hours, careful not to catch the staples or tug the skin loose. She kept apologizing for hurting me, but I

just stared at the ceiling and told her it was all right. My nerves up there were already dead.

As I healed, I heard affirmations from family and teachers and friends and ladies at church. “It’s a miracle you’re alive.” “You’re a survivor.” “God saved you for a reason.”

I tried to settle back into normal suburban life after the last surgery. My body grew stronger, and after declaring I didn’t need fussing over, I got less attention from family. Fine with me, I had learned to capture the male gaze—a strong sumptuous power that should have been used for good. I wanted to ride the sharp edge of adventure until I found my purpose in this world. And until I did, I thought I was invincible.

~

I got arrested on Halloween of 1996, for shoplifting a single red rose from the local supermarket. I could blame it on the wrong crowd, the pot smoking prep-school hippies I surrounded myself with at my upper-class suburban high school, but it was all about me, really. At sixteen, I lived by two mottos: it’s easier to get forgiveness than permission and you’re only in trouble if you get caught.

Momma worked long hours managing a staffing service to afford our quaint zero-lot line in a safe neighborhood just outside the Memphis city limits. When I got a call back from a local agency, she borrowed money to send me to modeling classes. My scars faded, my face thinned out into high cheek bones and framing brow lines like Momma’s, but I had those Green family eyes. There wasn’t much I couldn’t get with a toss of my hair and a little charm.

Finally ungrounded for something—skipping school, sneaking out, or that party I had thrown while Momma worked out of town, which resulted in a foot-sized hole in the kitchen Sheetrock—probably smoking pot, I can't remember. I decided to steal some cigarettes from the grocery store on my way to a party.

My friends called me five-finger-discount Candice. At sixteen, my family fell way below the income spectrum of my friends', but I figured I could make up for it with my spunk. I stole packs of cigarettes, hundreds of dollars in long-distance phone cards, bottles of nail polish, tubes of lip gloss, street signs, whole outfits from the Gap, and on occasion, my mother's car in the middle of the night for joyriding. I had only gotten caught once before, and when I looked up at the retail store manager with my sweet, sorry blue eyes on the verge of forced tears, he let me go. A rose seemed like chump change.

I walked out the entrance with the stem tucked under my sleeve (a rose for my buddy's girlfriend, he didn't have the balls to chance it) and three packs of Marlboro Lights in my jacket pocket. A brawny stock boy from the produce section ran after me and we squared off in the parking lot. He was dressed like an oversized Catholic school girl in a bleached, frizzy wig and a red plaid skirt. His thick, hairy calves flexed under the fishnets down to his combat boots.

“Did you pay for that?”

“Yes.” I ducked down, pretending to look under cars, praying someone right before me had dropped a receipt for one rose. He followed me.

“I don't think you did.”

“Well, here. You can have it back.” I offered him the rose. “Come on, man. It’s Halloween.”

“I can’t take it back. You need to come inside with me.” He went to touch my shoulder.

I jerked away and considered running, but I knew he’d catch me. When the manager called my mother, she told him to call the cops. I posed like a pageant queen holding my evidence. After filing the report, I got a female escort to the ladies’ room where I ditched the cigarettes, and back to my metal chair across from the officer. Momma walked in, took one look at my photo, said, “Take her downtown,” turned around, and walked out.

“Ma’am,” the policeman told her outside the manager’s office where I could hear. “If I take this cocky little suburban girl to city lock-up on Halloween night, I can’t promise you she’ll come back in one piece.”

So Momma brought me home and called Daddy.

“I’m losing her,” she said. “She skipped school again, the third time. Now she’s suspended during exams. She’s gonna get all F’s. I took her phone and her keys and I grounded her. So she snuck out her window—stole my company car to go see her boyfriend in the middle of the night.” Momma sighed. “I’ve done everything I know to do, but she won’t listen to me.”

“Is she on drugs?”

“I found a few joints rolled up in her cigarette pack. They had ‘Merry Christmas’ written on them. She said they weren’t for her. She was giving them away as presents to her friends because it was more economical than buying CD’s for everybody.”

“She-it,” Daddy scoffed.

“The officer agreed to suspend the charges if she moves out of Shelby County, on the condition she doesn’t get in any more trouble.”

“Send her up here to Paris,” he said. “I’ll straighten her out.”

Again, Momma helped me load boxes into the back of Daddy’s truck. But this time I hated her for shipping me off, for giving up.

PARTY AT LOST CREEK

Light pine panels ran behind the judge's bench of the Henry County courthouse, with the Tennessee state seal centered between two flags. Solid benches like church pews, a dozen rows or so, sat empty behind me. I was the last case of the day.

"Candice Green."

Daddy had rose with me and walked down front. The wooden floor creaked under our feet. He stopped at the front row. I stood alone, looking up at your honor as sweet and precious as any little girl could.

I wore my most innocent dress—a pale blue sheath with morning glories circling the hem at my knees. My hair pulled back into a plastic flower barrette, I could pass for pure.

"You have been charged with runaway, which is a Class A misdemeanor. Do you understand this charge?" Judge Hansel McAddams looked younger than the ones on television. He had a head full of hair black as his robe and a no-nonsense tone.

"Yes, your honor." I clasped my hands behind my back and stood up straight.

"On May fourteenth, you were released into your parents' custody, placed on house arrest?"

"Yes, sir." I raised my eyebrows and stared up at him.

"It's my understandin', you've already got theft charges in Shelby County, Miss Green. I can send you to a state juvenile detention center today." He glanced over at the bailiff and back at me. "I outta' put you custody right now." He wasn't bluffing.

My eyes widened and I took a step back. Through this whole thing, I had never actually seen the inside of a jail cell.

~

When I lived with Momma, I worked a deal between my Memphis boy and my Paris boy. On my every other weekend visits, I muled a pound of pot under the spare tire of my black Nissan Sentra, from one boyfriend to the other, stopping to skim a fat sack off the top before arriving at the print shop where the scales waited to bust the product into quarters. Another weekend, I did the same thing with sheets of LSD paper; they arrived striped a little narrower than when I got them. And of course, the boys would always give me a little for my trouble. I thought I was using them.

But Daddy ran a tighter ship—made me leave my car in Memphis and grounded me right off, a month to prove a point. As the city girl in a small town, most of the boys loved me and most of the girls hated me, but I tried to be good, clean. At first, I hung out with cheerleaders and honor students, but eventually found my way back to the pot heads. Daddy couldn't break that wild streak in me.

My old Paris boy long used up and tossed aside, Josh was a mutual acquaintance. He had eyes on me, and I could tell. I called him for our first date because I'd heard he got his hands on some acid, and I wanted to trip.

Josh was the kind of cowboy who could still taste the dirt from his last ride ten years ago. He used to carry his saddle across one shoulder and his custom Keflar riding vest and gear in a beat up leather bag slung over the other. When the bull would spin out of the chute, Josh held on and spurred it down the sides for extra points. He won almost every ride for a stretch. He'd take the prize money and lay a buckle bunny—one of the

easy girls who hung around after a ride. Josh would tip his hat and be on his way hitching down the highway.

“People’ll always pick up a cowboy,” he said.

Josh was the strong-jawed nightmare of every young girl’s father. He had a head full of sandy wild hairs under his cowboy hat, but he looked my Daddy in the eye when they shook hands. Josh called him, “Sir.”

He was done with high school and worked a night job at the air conditioning plant in town. In the face, he looked like Tim McGraw, all sparkly eyes and sweet smiles under his mustache. Josh dabbled in his father’s ways a little, mostly just slung weed for extra cash and only fronted his friends. But he gave me drugs for free because I was hot.

I figured out ways to get what I wanted without having to sleep around. Potential ass can be much more powerful than the real thing, but only while the anticipation stays warm. By the time I got old enough to capture a male gaze, I perfected the art of scavenging without seeming like a scavenger.

I was sure Daddy would give me an early curfew, so I did my homework and cleaned my room and asked if I could go to a late movie in the next town over.

“You be smart.” I always wondered why he didn’t tell me to be good.

“I will, Daddy. I love you.”

Riding back roads in his black Ford Ranger, we took the doses and smoked a joint on the way to watch *Beavis and Butthead Do America*. Rocking back and forth in the theater chairs, we waved our hands in front of each other’s faces and watched the trails follow like comet tails in slow motion. When the show was over and the buzz died down, he took me home where I pretended to be sleepy and kissed Daddy good night.

For hours I watched my walls bubble in the dark; I giggled as I sloshed around in my waterbed. After Daddy started snoring, I snuck to the downstairs bathroom where I sat in front of the mirror so I wouldn't be alone. I laughed with myself, and we solved the world's problems as the grain in the light blue wood paneling grew like vines. When the birds started chirping, I climbed in bed and slept until noon.

The next evening, Josh rang my doorbell and asked me out onto the porch.

"When I left your house last night, I drove out towards the lake. I felt something call me out there."

"You were trippin'," I whispered.

"No, it's not that. Listen. I drove over the bridge across the river, no music playin', just the wind," Josh said.

"You shouldn't have been drivin'."

"The Lord come to me."

"What?"

"It wasn't like an angel coming down from the sky, just a feeling that seized over me, an answer to all my questions about life. He told me to quit everything, all the wrong I been doin'."

"Like, everything?"

"Yeah. I'm done drinkin' and doin' drugs. I ain't had a cigarette all day."

After that night, Josh went straight-edge, hardcore Christian. I had been baptized as a kid, gone to church camps and religious retreats with my mother's side of the family. I believed in God and had felt the peace he was talking about. But I had strayed. I only prayed in dire times of need, like averting punishment for getting drunk or shop lifting or

lying to my parents. I wanted to be better. Josh's deep, inalterable belief seemed strong enough for us both. So I decided to stick with him.

Since Daddy felt the need to keep me close to home, Josh came over for supper often. After the dishes, he joined me on the front porch swing where we spent hours talking and stealing kisses until Daddy flicked the light. We dated for three months before we had sex. Then we asked forgiveness, and Josh disappeared.

~

The first Saturday night in May, Daddy sent me to Walmart with his girlfriend's daughter for some olive oil and garbage bags.

"Straight there and straight back."

But when we got to town, I saw that black Ford Ranger in the Kroger parking lot among a row of jacked-up trucks and top-down Jeeps. I convinced my ride to drop me off just for a minute, while she ran the errand.

"Okay. Meet you back here in ten minutes."

I got out and walked over to Josh's truck. In a white tank-top and Levi's, I leaned against the door, looked at his face in the driver's side mirror, and spoke into the open window.

"Hey." I smelled his Cool Water cologne.

"Hey."

"What's goin' on?" I asked a question that could be perceived several ways.

"A bunch of us is headed across the lake to Lost Creek. They gotta bonfire started. Tiffany ran to pick up the keg."

Leaning in, I saw he wasn't alone. Jeremy Allison, a burly friend of his and my cousin by marriage, poured a long neck beer into a Styrofoam cup. He nodded, I nodded.

"So I guess you ain't preachin' anymore," I asked.

"Still tryin' to figure it all out," Josh said.

"I sure wish I could come with y'all, but I have to be home in fifteen minutes."

"How old are you now, Candice," Jeremy asked.

"About to be seventeen."

"No offense, but I'm legal and I know your daddy. I ain't got no part in this." He laughed and got out of the truck.

"Man, it ain't like that," Josh said.

"What's it like, then?" I put a hand on my hip.

A girl in a blue truck cranked her engine and hollered for everybody to load out. Jeremy got in a Jeep full of girls.

"Right behind y'all." Josh waved.

The last one in line squealed tires back onto the main drag. I stood and watched them off. "I missed you," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Did ya' now?" He snickered. "So you been waitin' on me?"

I jerked my hand away. "How was I supposed to know you were coming back? You left without a good-bye, a fuck you, nothing. A month later, here you are."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I should have told you I was leavin'." And that was that.

"So you gonna be in town for a while?"

“All I know is right now, I got twenty dollars in my pocket and a place to sleep tonight. I don’t know what’s gonna’ happen tomorrow.”

“Can I come with you to Lost Creek?”

“Do what you want. But I ain’t bringin’ you back tonight.”

Everybody called it Lost Creek because it was so hard to find. Across the lake bridge and to the left toward Piney Camp Ground, a gravel road leads to another gravel road to a dirt path to a creek in the middle of nowhere.

“I think we’re lost.”

“Exactly.” Josh knew every stream and field for miles. He hunted and fished and sometimes got permission. Daddy would never be able to find me out here. When we splashed through water and edged up to a clearing, I saw the glow of the bonfire and a circle of SUV’s. I scooted out on Josh’s side, shut the door, and ran straight into Jeremy Allison.

“Aw, hell. Burton done brought the jail bait.”

“Hush you’re mouth, before I hush it for you.”

“And she’s a fighter, too. Watch out, y’all.” He handed the first of many beers.

When the party simmered down, Jeremy, Josh, and I headed out to a farm house on the edge of town where we would crash for the night. The owner was gone and had asked Josh to keep an eye on the place. Jeremy passed out on the couch while Josh and I crept upstairs to the attic bedroom. He opened a window to let in the night breeze. I turned off the lights and lay with him in the creaking twin bed.

We made love like teenagers with no tomorrow.

Bam. Bam. Bam. Jeremy pounded on the wooden door and walked right in. The room was bright and hot and Josh snored. I covered with the sheet.

“I don’t mean to bust up y’all’s good time, but your girl Crystal Banks just called and said her daddy and your daddy are on their way out here. And they are pissed. Done called the po-lice.”

“Shit. Okay.” I shook Josh awake. “We gotta’ get outta here. My father’s coming.”

“Now?”

“Right now.” I rolled over him and held the sheet to my chest. Jeremy left us alone. My jeans smelled like hickory smoke, and I scrambled to put them on along with my bra, but I couldn’t find my tank-top. I looked in the bed, under the bed, everywhere.

Josh dressed in seconds. “Fuck it. Let’s go.” He tossed a t-shirt at me.

I put it on and wadded my panties into my purse. On the way out, I wrote Crystal a note. *Calm him down. He’s out of control. –C.*

We ran out to the truck and Josh did a Bo Duke hood-slide across the front. I jumped in and scooted to the middle. He put on his straw cowboy hat and caught rubber as we pulled out on the highway. With old Hank cranked up loud, I tied my shirt in knot above my waist, slipped off my shoes, and put my bare feet up on the dashboard.

Josh shot me a sly smile I felt all the way to my toes. I smiled back at him and kissed the wind. When he shifted gears and dropped the hammer, we ran wide open twenty miles south to Elkhorn Refuge.

When he turned onto a gravel road toward Cypress Bay, the back-end fish tailed, and a cloud of dust rose up behind us. I leaned over, planted one on his cheek, and stole his hat.

“You think you can be a country girl?” He continued to the tree line.

Hanging half out the window, I hollered loud as I could. “Hell yeah!” I waved his hat and took on the wind. My hair flew in long thatches, the skin on my face pulled taught, his t-shirt billowed over my tan body. Running from the law on those back roads, I had never felt so free in my entire life.

~

Standing on a grassy hill overlooking the meadow, the sky looked so clear, like settled water. Josh leaned against the tailgate; I leaned against him. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I rested my head in the bend and grazed his arm with my fingertip. We watched nature in the quiet, not a sign of civilization for miles.

“Why’d you come back to Paris?” I wanted him to say because of me, but I knew better.

“I have to go to court, a burglary charge from a while back.”

“What did you steal?”

“It was dumb. Me and a bunch a buddies broke into this huntin’ cabin in Dover. This guy had twelve gauges and deer rifles and a couple a real nice bows.” Josh loosened and propped back on the truck. “Well, the law come askin’ and somebody talked. It’s my first offense, so I’ll probably get probation. Eleven months and twenty-nine days.”

“Did you get rid of the evidence?”

“Threw all the guns and scopes and arrows I took and threw ‘em off the Kentucky Lake bridge. It’s all sunk down in the mud.”

“Then they can’t prove anything. You could beat it.” I turned to face him.

“I ain’t gonna’ fight it.” He shook his head and looked hurt. “Come to find out, one a’ them shotguns, the old muzzle-loader, belonged to the man’s grandfather—passed down when he died. I wish I could give it back.”

“It’s just a gun. He’ll be okay.”

“Candice, you don’t understand. My grandfather passed a gun down to me, and it’s my most valued possession. He raised me till I was nine, died of cancer, and grandma’, too, shortly after. It’s all I got left of them.”

“What about your parents?”

“My father ain’t really been a father. He comes around every now and then, gives me cash, splits a week later—or however long it takes to find the anhydrous ammonia for his next batch of crystal meth. He’s been in and out of lock-down my whole life.”

“You’re lucky he’s not constantly tryin’ to keep *you* in a cage.”

“My uncle raised me till he got married a couple a years ago. Taught me how to ride bulls up in Missouri.

“What about you’re mom?”

“On husband number four, or five, I can’t remember. That’s how we wound up in Paris. She got strung out for a while, cleaned up, strung out again. I just stuck around to look after my little sister.”

“Gina’s in my home economics class.”

“I just don’t want her getting’ in trouble like me.”

“You’re not so bad.” I pressed my body against him and kissed the curve of his shoulder, his bare bicep, his bull rider tattoo.

Josh put his hands on my waist. “I can’t get caught with you, Candice.”

“I know.” I folded into him, and we swayed back and forth. “There’s a payphone at the Tackle Box Bait Shop on the lake highway.”

“You ready to face up?”

“No.” I straightened up. “But I have to.”

Josh waited in the empty parking lot of the old cinderblock bait shop. With a quarter from the ashtray, I called Daddy’s girlfriend to come get me, figuring she could serve as a buffer. She agreed. I had five minutes.

“I don’t know when I’ll get to see you again.” I kissed his forehead, his nose, his lips. “I love you.” It was the first time.

He winked and tipped his hat. “I love you, too.” Josh eased away, and I watched his truck top the hill.

~

Even standing before the judge in the courtroom, I thought it was all worth it– the butt whooping Daddy gave me with his belt when I refused to cry, the chastising from the officers at the County Jail when I signed my warrant, the look on Momma’s face when I refused to speak to her that Sunday morning I got charged, Mother’s Day.

“Miss Green, why would you knowingly continue to break the law, just to spend one night out with a boy?”

“Because I love him.” I felt like a soap opera actress.

“Like you love your father?” Your honor’s words echoed in the empty courtroom.

My first reaction was to say something about the grossness of incest, but when I turned around and saw Daddy’s face, I suppressed my comment. I had never seen him look so old, worried, frail. I was responsible for all those wrinkles on his face, the creases around his eyes, the lines on his forehead. I kept quiet.

“Miss Green, I’m sentencing you to three months of house arrest and six months probation upon which you will take random drug tests, serve twenty hours of community service, and attend five sessions with a court appointed family counselor. Do you understand your sentence.”

“Yes, your honor.”

“And if you so much as jaywalk, Miss Green, I’m taking you into custody.”

“Yes, sir.”

He wrapped his gavel, and I walked out with Daddy. My probation officer, a spry woman with pudgy fingers, one she stuck in my face by the swinging door. I half smiled and pretended to be submissive, but she wasn’t having any of my games.

“You better wipe that smirk off your face, Missy. I ain’t playin’ with you.”

I dropped the act, and glanced at Daddy.

“Don’t be lookin’ at him. You’re in trouble with the State of Tennessee, now. I wanna’ see you in one month, and you’re gettin’ a drug test, so you better clean up.”

~

Henry County only had one judge who presided over both general sessions and juvenile courts, and old Judge McAddams was good friends with my daddy. In the

courtroom, he called Josh's name from the docket, and said, "Meet in chambers at recess."

Behind the closed doors, your honor offered him two options: take a charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, or take ten licks with the thick wooden paddle the judge kept behind his desk. Josh had never got an ass-whipping so bad, he couldn't sit down for hours. The next day, I looked out the living room window and saw Josh pulling up my long gravel driveway in his black Ford Ranger. I thought he was crazy. My daddy would kill him.

Josh didn't walk to the front door like he used to when he picked me up for dates, before all the drama. Instead, he walked over to the garage where Daddy stood over his grinder, sharpening the lawnmower blade. Orange sparks bowed out and disappeared on the ground.

They talked for a minute. I saw them shake hands. Josh got back in his truck and left. He didn't have to ask permission or forgiveness from anybody, but he asked my father anyway. After he settled up with Daddy, he was the only boy I was allowed to see the whole summer of my junior year. Josh helped me paint my room "warm spring blue" and he fixed his truck in the garage with Daddy and he took his hat off at the supper at the table.

One evening in late June, we sat in the porch swing listening to the crickets while Josh explained how he wanted to leave town.

"I talked to my Uncle Lee up in Missouri. He owns a house on about 100 acres right outside of Piedmont and a construction business. Says I gotta job if I want it and a place to stay till I find somethin'."

“Are you gonna go?” He couldn’t leave me stranded like this.

“Yeah.”

Here I had gotten into all this trouble for him, and he was just going to fly away to a better life?

“I thought you couldn’t leave the state,” I said.

“The judge gave me the ok, long as I stay out of trouble.”

“Are you serious? You’re gonna go?” I thought about having to stay home alone with nothing to look forward to for another month and a half. All day, everyday, I did my chores and watched television and thought about Josh, my cowboy. I waited everyday at five o’clock to see his Ford Ranger pull in my driveway, to spend as much time with him as Daddy would allow.

“Just like that?” I snapped.

“Think about it, Candice. There ain’t nothin’ for me here in Paris. My dad’s off somewhere in jail, my mom’s off marryin’ some dope head. I live in the spare room at my best friend’s parent’s house. All I got to my name is that truck and few boxes. I’m almost twenty years old.”

“But I still have a year left in school.”

“You’re the one always tellin’ me to go after my dreams. This way, I can make some money and figure out what I’m gonna do with my life.” He tipped down the bill of his ball cap and put his arm across the swing.

“Please don’t go,” I begged. I had never loved a boy so hard in my life, and I wasn’t about to let him go without a fight. So I tried to pick one, but he wouldn’t argue with me.

“I need to get outta’ here,” he said in a calm voice. Josh stood and pulled me up. “I just wanted to tell you good bye.”

He kissed me good and strong, like it was the last time. I brought my hands to his face and felt a release, not like the lust of so many times before, but a longing for something I could never have again.

~

The next day, he packed up his truck and made the rounds to bid farewell to all his buddies. On the way out of town, he stopped by Chris Adamson’s house. He lived in a homemade apartment above his father’s garage. His father Edgar was a preacher, and a farmer and he worked on cars. Josh knocked on Chris’s door, but nobody answered. As Josh turned to leave, he saw Edgar—a six foot three Santa Clause of a man in cruddy overalls—crossing the yard see what he wanted.

“Lookin’ for Chris?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“He run to the store, won’t be back for a while. Can I tell him something’ for ya?”

“Well, I guess just tell him that Josh Burton said goodbye. I’m movin’ out of town, and I just wanted to see him. Guess I’ll just get on the road.”

“Where you headed?”

Josh proceeded to tell the preacher about his uncle and the job, and somehow they got on the subject of God. Edgar started quoting scripture, asking Josh if he’d been saved, if Jesus was his Lord, and if he believed in miracles. Josh talked openly about his

faith. He'd gone to church with his grandparents as a kid, knew Sunday school lessons about David and Goliath and all that, but he had strayed in his recent years.

"I felt the Spirit a few months back." Josh got quiet.

Edgar took a moment to pray, "for if two or more come together in agreement, it shall be done." He asked the Lord to comfort Josh and give him guidance, to let His work be done through this willing vessel, to get the devil out of this boy and let him do God's work. Amen.

"The Lord says, you give Him 90 days," Brother Edgar boomed. "You come to my church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night for three months. I don't care what you do the rest of the week. I guarantee the Lord will change your life forever."

I had my life back, just one more school year and I could go anywhere I wanted. With all my hard work, Daddy warned me not to let things slide, or I would be grounded again for months.

The only day I stayed home from school that semester, Josh brought me chicken soup and took care of me in Daddy's chair. As soon as we finished, I went to my room to get dressed.

"I feel like I just got pregnant," I said, stepping into my panties.

Josh looked at me and shook his head. "Don't say that."

DOUBLE NEGATIVE

I smelled Daddy's coffee brewing when the first drop hit the pot. I smelled everything lately. Outside my mound of covers, it was a brisk, countrified day in early October 1997. His morning ritual included an entire pot of Maxwell House, starting with the first cup and the Weather Channel. He took a shower and dressed in his creased blue jeans and navy work shirt with "Ronnie" embroidered in white letters above the pocket. Daddy poured a fresh cup and crept in to wake me. I never needed an alarm clock. Even on weekends, he declared I had to get my ass out of bed before I slept the whole day away. The yard needed mowing. The dish washer needed emptying. Something always needed something done to it, and right the first time or it needed to be done again.

He used to rock the foot of the mattress. "Time to get up."

To which I'd respond from the corner of my mouth, "Five more minutes."

Sometimes he gave it to me.

After a summer of house arrest and clean drug tests, he lightened up on me. Daddy opened my door and sat on the padded side-rail of my king-size waterbed. I always slept on my stomach, my thin frame smack dab in the middle, hugging a pillow, sometimes drooling. Daddy reached over with his long arm, tanned dark like a farmer's with blonde hair from working all day in the sun, and gently rubbed my back.

"Candice, wake u-u-u-p," he would almost sing. "Good morning to you."

I stirred. This would be our most peaceful moment of the day, the moment I didn't try to oppose every word he said, the fresh beginning.

"Good morning to you," he went an octave higher.

Daddy knew how long it took me to get ready. High school had become my only social activity. After I dressed in the outfit I had laid out the night before, I poured a glass of orange juice and sat next to him at the bar. It was Homecoming, and the principal was going to read nominations for queen on the morning announcements.

“Says in the paper that the dance starts at 8:30. I expect you home by 11:00 on the dot. I don’t mean 11:01 or 11:05, neither.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I said it genuine this time, not smart-ass like usual. “I have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon, so I need you to write me a note to check out.”

“You sick?”

“No. It’s my lady doctor.” We never talked about these things.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I had convinced myself it was the truth. “I’m gonna go to school, and then by the doctor’s office, and come home to curl my hair before the dance.” I finished my juice and put the glass in the sink. Daddy reached for a pen and paper to write me an excuse. He put on his reading glasses and checked the date on his watch.

“You know where the dishwasher is?” He didn’t even look up.

I rinsed out my glass and put it on the top rack, slanted just the way he liked so the water would roll off the base and not leave spots. When Daddy finished writing, I kissed him on the cheek and tore the sheet from the pad.

I primped in the mirror and dolled myself up with the latest smoky eye shadow, brownish black mascara, and a swipe of bronzer at my cheekbones. I wore a light blue chenille sweater to bring out my eyes and put on my off-white, bootlegged dress pants, not worried about the light color because I hadn’t gotten my period in weeks. I knew.

Every two hours for the past few days, I'd excused myself to the ladies room, always betrayed by the clean cotton patch between my legs. I figured if I wore light pants I would jinx myself like always, and today of all days, the bitch would show.

I wasn't so worried about the doctor's appointment. I couldn't be pregnant. I had proof in the double negative.

~

Two weeks before, I had read in *Seventeen* in the "Questions About Your Bod" section that girls could miss a cycle if they got too thin. I wore a size 0, extra small everything, and sometimes even kid sizes if the tops were cute enough. I was a late bloomer, and my breasts were still developing. Tenderness had become a staple in my life. Lately, though, falling asleep on my stomach had become a problem even in my waterbed. It had give. I figured it was part of growing up, the price you pay in the beginning for bigger breasts. I'd take it. I needed to fill out more so I could look older.

After I counted the days on my calendar and realized I was thirteen days late, I ate second helpings at supper. But in quiet moments throughout the day, after quizzes in Biology or in the silence between songs on a CD or at night after I prayed, I heard a small voice far away in my own head.

"You're pregnant. You're pregnant. You're pregnant." It soothed in a fading echo.

Am not. That couldn't happen to me. I'm not poor. I'm not some trashy girl who gets knocked up in high school. Something else must be wrong. My mother had problems with her lady parts; I remembered her recovering from a hysterectomy when I

was in elementary school. My luck, I had inherited the bad gene. I almost believed myself, but I needed proof.

One night after supper, Daddy let me go out with Josh—just for an hour because it was a week night. I rode in the middle of the bench seat in that black Ford Ranger all the way to the next town over, about twenty minutes on back roads. We didn't want anyone we knew seeing us buy a pregnancy test. Just about everybody in the county knew my Daddy; he'd lit nearly every furnace pilot light in every house since he started at the Natural Gas Company fifteen years ago. Josh didn't want him finding out anymore than I did. I shivered. After Josh shifted into fifth gear, I held his hand for the long stretch of hilly, country highway.

“I don't think I am.” I didn't even want to say the word. “I'm just late.”

“We'll get a test to make sure. Let's not talk about it until we know one way or the other.” In his profile shadow, I admired the slope of his nose where it rounded off above his trimmed moustache above his thin lips above his chin whiskers. I stared at him as we passed under the occasional street light. His fingers entwined in mine. I wondered if he had heard the voice, too.

We stopped at the Quick Mart across the county line where sometimes they sold him beer without asking for ID. Josh went in; I stayed in the truck with the tinted windows rolled up. He walked around inside for a minute and came back out with a brown paper sack which I rumped open before he even backed out of the parking space. He'd bought an orange juice for me, two tall boys for him, and the bonus pack of EPT. It had two sticks.

“Just what I always wanted.” I sprinkled sarcasm like salt on everything.

Problem was, not all people interpreted my sense of humor for what it was.

“You said orange juice.” His calm, rugged demeanor turned tense.

“I’m just playin’ around. Relax.” I handed him a beer as soon as we pulled out on the road. Normally I’d complain about him drinking and driving, but I reckoned tonight he deserved it.

We headed north down highway 140 toward the lake. I drank my juice and sat quiet and listened to the twang of country music floating from the speakers. As Josh pulled down a gravel road leading to a quiet spot on the riverbank, I bounced around trying not to hit my head on the gun rack behind me. He stopped the truck, pushed in the emergency brake pedal, and turned off the headlights. The music stayed on, but lower. Alabama sang about working crops during the Great Depression, but they still walked in “high cotton.” I gulped o.j. and thought things could be worse. Josh tore open the box and dug out the folded sheet inside. He handed it to me and turned on the interior light.

“The directions say,” I pronounced like I was about to read a speech aloud.

“Instruccion de examen por lo embarazo.”

“Other side. Quit messin’,” he sounded nervous. His rough palm grazed the back of my hand as he flipped the page over to the other side. He gave me a look with his muddy green eyes that said it was time to get serious.

The process seemed pretty clear: remove cap, pee on stick, replace cap, wait three minutes. One line equals not pregnant. Two lines equal pregnant.

“Okay. I’m gonna go do my business.”

“Alright. I gotta pee, too. You go in front. I’ll go in back.”

Though we'd gotten familiar with each other's goods six months ago, I still didn't want him to see me go to the bathroom, or even hear it. When he came by the house and I had to go, I turned on a steady stream at the sink faucet, courtesy water to mask the sound like he didn't know what I was doing in there. But using the bathroom wasn't sexy. I didn't want him to think of me that way. I twisted my thick hair up into a messy bun and secured it with a ponytail elastic. I always kept one around my wrist.

"Hey," I said.

"Yeah?"

"No matter what, I love you." I loved the country in the man of nineteen who took on my father, the freedom Josh represented. A rough-neck boy without any decent family around to speak of, he'd gone through hell with Daddy, just to be around me. But they'd finally settled up. We all hit a smooth spell, getting ready for the end. In a year, I'd go off to college and Josh would go off to some of his family up in Missouri and Daddy would stay right there in the house he built just outside of town.

"I love you, too," Josh said. And he did. I could feel it in the vibration his words sent through the air straight to me. I could see deep past the fear when he looked me in the eye so close I could tell when he changed focus from my left to my right.

"Let's do this. Ready, set, go." I jumped out armed with my EPT and ran round to the front tire. A country girl knows how to cop a squat. Crouched near the front bumper so I could hold on, I dropped my pants and underwear to my knees, spread them far enough apart to avoid back splash, and rolled up on my tip toes so as not to get my shoes in it. I held the stick in my "full stream of urine for 20 seconds." I counted in my head. One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi, Three-Mississippi.

I hoped my aim was good enough in the dark. I could hear it hit the absorbing tip, with background noises of crickets and frogs and Josh's full stream. When I was done, I replaced the cap and placed the test on the hood near the flat center so it wouldn't slide off. I pulled up and zipped up and Josh did the same. We met at the passenger door, me bearing the prized stick in my palms.

"It has to lay flat," I said.

"Hand it here, and I'll put it on the tail gate." I did, and he did. We smoked a cigarette a piece and checked the time on his truck radio. He put in AC/DC, classic rock in our time, and we listened to the ominous tolling opening of "Hells Bells." When time was up, I grabbed the stick and he turned on the cargo light, but I could barely see.

"Hit the headlights, please." I ran around to the front, nearly stepping in my own puddle. I held it toward the brightness. In the result window, I saw a single line. "We're good," I shouted. "Not pregnant."

Josh came over, and we stared at it for a long time as winged bugs flocked to the light, casting shadows like huge, terrible creatures swarming on the surface of gently lapping water. I looked up into the September moonlight.

"Thank you, Jesus," I said.

"You got that right." Josh stood and wrapped his arms around my small waist. I took off his ball cap and scruffed his hair on top. He smiled and tried to smooth it down. He looked like himself again, the worry all gone. Josh had a widow's peak of sandy hair that curled just above his ears. He liked it cut short, but wore it a little shaggy because he knew I liked it that way. His high cheekbones and pronounced jaw left the shadow of a dent in his heart shaped face.

Next to this, any of life's other problems—arguments with friends, fights with Daddy, questions about who I was turning out to be—seemed like nothing. And Josh had stood by me through everything, just like always. I threw my arms around his neck. I kissed him long and hard, like we had just survived a crash, so happy nothing had changed. We were safe.

“We’re never doing it again,” I said.

“Without a condom,” he added.

I didn't answer. Instead, I finished off his beer and peed on the other test just to be sure. It showed the same result. I walked to the water's edge, threw the plastic sticks as far as I could into the darkness, and heard two splashes in the distance. When our hour was up, Josh drove me back home. He walked me to the door, gave me a peck on the cheek, and waved goodbye to my father still working on his car in the garage. After I changed into a baggy t-shirt and boxer shorts, I slipped into bed early. I lie still, listening for the voice. It was gone. I thanked the good Lord for sparing me and promised to be a good, Christian girl from then on. Not like I had promised on so many occasions before. For serious this time.

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The homeroom bell rang just as I slid into my desk in the back row. After the “Moment of Silence,” because prayer had been long banned from public school, the principal's voice came over the loud speaker.

There were about a thousand students at Henry County High, a quarter of them seniors. If things worked like my old school, every student cast a vote. I knew plenty of the underclassmen, cousins related by marriage somehow. Instead of blending in with

the cliques of name-brand, t-shirt wearing preps, I had made friends with more of the other groups, mainly the hippy-alternative kids, which made up more of the student population. You can't walk up from the city and act like you're too big for a small town because no one will make friends with a person who trashes the place. But if you do, you learn pretty damn quick how shut up and make friends in whomever you can. When I decided to embrace the country, find the fun, and quit acting like I was better than anybody else, I made friends all over the place.

The principal's voice sounded low like the one that read the fishing report on the local radio. "Tonight is the homecoming dance for this year's champion football Patriots."

Cheers from every classroom leaked into the hallways.

"I expect all students to act with respect and responsibility."

Boos from the wise-asses like me barely made it out the door.

"The homecoming queen nominations are in, and the winner will be crowned tonight." As the principal read each name in alphabetical order, shouts and claps from the girls' fans traveled round the halls of the round-dome buildings. I listened, still like waiting for the last BINGO number when the card is all covered up but one. He read the list down to the G's.

"Candice Green."

My homeroom clapped, maybe not as loud as others, but someone gave a loud "Aw, yeah" holler that made me laugh and other folks too. I felt kind of sorry for the next girl because everyone carried on over the loud speaker, and the teacher had to quiet us down. I wanted to bounce around like a contestant called down front in the Price is

Right. But then they would all know. I had to act cool—happy but humble. I was just as pretty as the other girls on the list, and I had started getting curve like a woman, filling out nice.

“The Homecoming Ceremony will begin at 8:30 tonight in the gym, and last year’s queen, Stacy Redden, will pass the crown to your new Henry County Homecoming Queen.”

I thought I had a decent chance.

“Votes from the entire football team, each player casts one vote, will be tallied this afternoon.”

Football team? I thought it was the stupidest thing I ever heard. Besides, I didn’t know many football players. I hadn’t slept with any, not that it was a requirement. I rather thought it a plus. I pictured them all sitting around draped in practice pads in the locker room, remarking on every nomination, maybe ranking girls on the dry erase board scrawled with x’s and o’s and arrows. I had no chance put up against the wholesome cheerleaders who traveled with them out of town for games, spent all that quality time on the bus. This was their school. My arrangement was temporary.

Even if I couldn’t win, I had made the list of a dozen top girls out of my senior class. I was popular. Officially.

When the clock hit 11:00, I walked to the attendance office and handed Daddy’s note to the lady behind the desk. She turned her thin lips to a frown and scrutinized it for a second, being as I had gotten caught forging before. She pointed to a clipboard. I signed my name, and the lady wrote down the time and her initials. I hated needing permission

to do everything. Didn't these adults know I could make my own decisions? I walked out with my backpack slung over one shoulder, switching my hips all the way to my car.

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I filled out my name, address, and insurance information. I checked "no" for heart problems and diabetes and HIV. I checked "yes" for irregular menstrual cycle. Previous pregnancies: 0. Previous live births: 0. Date of last period? I always wondered if they meant the first day or the last. 08/15/97.

I had barely spotted a couple of days in September, but I didn't really consider that a cycle, but I figured I would explain in the exam room. Though I was still a minor for nine more months, I signed and dated all the patient forms. No way would I let Daddy bring me to the lady doctor. I could take care of things all by myself.

I turned in my clipboard and pulled *The Scarlet Letter* out of my bag. We had to write a report on it for senior English, but I couldn't concentrate. My mind drifted to the future, not like normal—me going off to college in the city and building a high profile career and making boatloads of money. I imagined the separate future of my boyfriend and his plans to buy some land and build a log cabin in the hills with plenty of hunting land and a catfish pond.

And then I heard the voice again. "You're pregnant." It sounded so loud inside my head I turned around to see if anyone else had heard.

I couldn't be. I mean, it was physically possible, but both of the EPT's had turned out negative. I had proof in the form of one single pink line, twice. I wished I would have kept them in my purse, brought them with me. Looking around the waiting room, I

wondered if certain women had that glow I'd heard so much about. How could you tell? I brushed off my shoulders. I tried to read again.

“Candice Green.” A perky nurse in purple scrubs and a yellow ponytail led me back to a small white room with a set of scales, a side table, and a black plastic chair. A tan countertop ran along the far wall. I weighed 98 pounds, slightly on the skinny side for my five-four frame, but not too thin. My hipbones protruded just enough, like a Victoria Secret model. I had long legs, a short waist and natural highlights that framed my face. Depending on what I wore, my eyes would change from a crystal gray to bright turquoise. People asked me all the time if I wore colored contacts.

Nurse Karen flipped through my chart.

“You doin’ alright today?” It was a question most people answered with, “Fine. How’re you?” But I thought I had to tell somebody or I would bust into bits of confetti right there in the work-up room.

“I got nominated for homecoming queen today.”

“Well, congratulations.” She looked me over like a mother hen. “And you’re so pretty. I bet you win.”

“Thanks,” I said, bringing a hand to my chest.

“Enjoy it, honey. I was homecoming queen back in ‘82, when I had a tiny waist and perky boobs and the time of my life.”

“Oh, I will.” I gave a courtesy smile, but refused to believe this was the best time of my life. Though she bleached her hair and glowed from the tanning bed, I could still see the beautiful girl in her oval face.

Nurse Karen smiled and handed me a clear plastic cup with a lid, my name printed on a white label. “Fill this up in the ladies’ room, hun, first door on your right. I’ll meet you right back here in a few minutes.”

“Oh, I’m not pregnant. I can’t be.” I didn’t explain about the negative tests.

“It’s just procedure. I’m sure you’re only having a little fluctuation in your cycle, but we do it in case you need x-rays.”

“Right. Of course.” So I did as I was told and washed my hands and returned to the chair.

Nurse Karen bounced in a few minutes later with a white, plastic square. When she sat it on the counter to my left, I noticed the blank result window with +/- printed above it. Even an idiot could figure that out.

On the other side, Nurse Karen lifted my arm and laid it on the side table. She found my pulse with two manicured fingertips.

“What does your dress look like?”

“It’s white, sleeveless, to the floor—very simple, but I’ve got great accessories.” I opened my mouth to accept the thermometer. After it beeped, she wrote something on my chart and I kept on. “I can’t decide how to wear my hair. I think it looks better down, but I have these sparkly chandelier earrings. Either way, I’m gonna’ curl it after I leave here.”

“How high is your neckline?” She slipped the blood pressure cuff around my thin bicep and placed the stethoscope earpieces so she could hear my heart rate.

“Up to here.” With my idle hand, I made a slice like a director’s cut in the middle of my throat.

“Definitely wear it up then.” Nurse Karen placed the cool circle in the bend of my arm and pumped the plastic bulb in a steady rhythm.

When I felt the tightening, I turned my head to let the woman concentrate. I glanced over at the pregnancy test on the counter. A red + radiated back at me. I leaned forward to make sure it wasn't a glare from the florescent lights. I jerked my arm, cuff and all, away from Nurse Karen. I stood up and hovered directly over the little, round test result window. Positive. I paced back and forth in front of the counter, the rubber hose and bulb dangling from my arm.

“That can't be right. I want another one.”

She looked over at the evil red plus sign and wrote something down on my chart. I wanted to smack it out of her hand, not because it was positive, not because it was anybody's fault but my own. Nurse Karen was just doing her job. But she looked me straight in the face and gave me the first in a lifetime of pitiful reactions. Her face softened. With eyebrows perched above sad eyes, she tightened her lips. She tilted her head and shook it slightly back and forth. She said, “You poor thing,” without having to say anything at all. Like I ought to be ashamed of myself.

“I tell you what. Let's get you to an exam room and the doctor can do a pelvic. That's more reliable than a urine test anyway.” She snapped around. “Right this way.”

I wanted to tell her girls like me didn't get knocked up. I was the charming, smart one who had goals and potential. I came from good country people. I was going be the first female in my daddy's family to graduate college. But I didn't say a word. I just picked up my purse and followed her swishing ponytail to door number three, a room that smelled Lysol fresh with a hint of mulberry potpourri. The nurse handed me a blue paper

gown and what looked like a pink table cloth for a picnic table. She instructed me to strip, put the gown on open-in-front, and drape the pink sheet over my lap. The doctor would be in shortly.

When the door closed, I was alone. But not really. There was something alive inside my body. My father would kill me. Josh first, then me. Daddy would load his shotgun and hunt us down in the back hills of Elkhorn Refuge.

I pried my shoes off without unbuckling them. Being as they would soon be up in stirrups, I wondered if my feet stank. Then I decided I didn't give a shit if they smelled bad or not. I had more important things to consider. The tile floor was cold and clean. I took off my pants and sweater, gazing at my flat abdomen, the slanted line of shadow that ran from my hips down to my lady parts. I checked my panties one more time, like my period had miraculously appeared in the last ten minutes. When I saw it didn't, I slipped them off. I unhitched my bra and threw it in the corner chair with the rest of my rumpled clothes.

"Please, God," I spoke aloud, hoping my prayer meant more if I said it instead of just thinking it. "I repent my sins to you in the name of Jesus. I'm sorry for all the wrong that I've done. I fornicated, but I promise I won't have sex again until I'm married, Father. Just please, please, please, let that test be wrong. I'll quit drugs and smoking. I'll get back in church regular. I'll preach the Gospel and lead people to your light. Amen. And I'll tithe my next paycheck. Amen. And I'll spend a year as a missionary, anything you want me to do, Lord. Really. Amen."

I looked at myself in the rectangular mirror above the sink. I exhaled a deep breath and put on my most convincing face. “Candice, you are not pregnant.” My chances of a false positive were about as much as my shot at the homecoming crown.

Whatever my blood pressure had been minutes before, it peaked now. I heard my heartbeat in my ears and then a knock at the door.

“Just a minute, please.” The paper gown crinkled as I slipped my arms through the holes. I grabbed the drape and hopped up on the table. Rustling paper with every move, I situated myself on the exam table. My feet didn’t even reach the step below, so I swung my legs and waited in silence for another knock.

Since I had started having sex a few years ago, I thought if I ever got pregnant, I would just get an abortion. It had been legal for years. We read about *Roe v. Wade* in American History class, between Watergate and the Challenger explosion. I knew my options, my rights as a woman. I had watched Tammy on MTV’s *The Real World* in recovery after her procedure. It looked painful, but I could handle it.

I’d known several girls who’d had abortions, and they seemed fine after a few days of good crying. And what about all those girls who had done it and not told a soul? I would be one of those. With the way carried on with so much drama anyway, Daddy wouldn’t even notice. In a couple of weeks, I could get on with my life.

Knock, knock.

The gynecologist opened the door, followed by Nurse Karen who was not so perky this time. I imagined her briefing the doctor outside the door as I fumbled to put my gown on the right way.

“Hello, Candice. I’m Dr. B.” She was an older lady with a helmet of graying curls and oversized glasses. “You’re Sandy Scott’s niece, aren’t you? She was in here the other day.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Why did everyone have to know my family?

“I see you’re having an irregular cycle.” She flipped through the papers in my chart and circled something.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And a positive pregnancy test.”

“But it could be wrong. I took two last week, and they were both negative.”

“It may not have shown up yet, did you use the morning’s first urine?”

I sat quiet, like when Daddy asked if I had double checked my math homework.

“Take a couple of deep breaths for me.” Dr. B. put her stethoscope on my chest.

I inhaled, exhaled.

“Lay back on the table here. I’m going to do a breast exam.” She raised my right hand over my head and pressed in circular motions around my tender breast to the center. She moved to the other side and repeated the process. It hurt like hell, but I didn’t show it. “Are you on birth control?” Dr. B asked.

“Orthotryciclen.”

“Do you take it as prescribed?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“When was the last time you were sexually active?”

“A little over a week ago.”

“And your last period was in mid-August? Today is October tenth.” She tapped her pen in the air like she was counting and wrote something on my chart. “Have you been otherwise healthy? Taken any prescription medications?”

“I had the flu right after school started back. I took a Z-pack.” There it was.

“You know, prescription medications like that suppress the effects of the pill.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I remembered the pharmacist telling me when I got my first pack of birth control pills, over a year back. But I hadn’t been sick since then, except for that once. I looked down like a child scolded for a careless mistake.

“Did you use a condom or other protection?”

“Most of the time.” It was true. Though Josh and I had dated for eight months, I still made him wrap it up. Sometimes though, my lust overpowered my brain. I could remember a few times, *I* ordered *him* not to stop. If bare-skinned, Josh would pull out. But I heard in a rap song that every player dribbles before he shoots. It only takes one drop. We thought we were being careful. Not careful enough.

“Scoot to the end of the table, dear.”

Up clicked the stirrups, and I assumed the most embarrassing position a woman can get into— with her business wide open to the world. I had trimmed just for the occasion. I didn’t know who my doctor would be, but I had dignity enough to keep my lady in check. It’s not like she would say, “Oh, well that’s a lovely vagina,” like a dentist would say about a smile, but still.

Dr. B, assisted by Nurse Karen, inspected under my drape. I wondered if the cold contraption—probably invented by a man—compared anything to the discomfort of an

abortion. I questioned whether they numbed you down there, or just let you feel the pain in penance.

“Relax now. Just let your legs fall open.”

Wasn't that how I got myself here in the first place? I didn't know why I was acting so prudish and polite, as if Dr. B. would remove her gloved hand and declare me fit as a fiddle because I used my manners. She pressed on my abdomen with one hand. I felt the pressure of her holding me inside with the other, like cramping but different, fuller.

When she finished, Dr. B let out nothing more than a stolid, “Mmm.”

I couldn't decipher the tone.

Peeling off the gloves and tossing them in the biohazard bin, she headed straight to the sink and turned on the water. I wondered if her silence worked for or against me. Perhaps Nurse Karen's face could provide a hint, but she just dropped the stirrups, plucked two tissues from a box, and handed them to me. I didn't know if she wanted me to clean up right there, or if she knew I was about to cry. I questioned how many times before they had examined seventeen-year-old girls like me, if they had an outlined procedure for this kind of situation.

As Dr. B washed her hands, I sat up to look at her reflection in the mirror, searching for some sort of sign. The longer she stayed quiet, the more I expected the worst. I tossed up an instant prayer for Him to please let her repeat the words I had declared in that same spot only minutes before.

“Well?” I asked before she even dried her hands.

“Your uterus is six to eight weeks swollen.” Dr. B turned around and worked the paper towel around her wedding ring.

I didn’t break down. I kept a serious face, proper as moisture glazed my vision. It gathered in the rims of my eyes until drops formed and meandered down to my chin where they clung until enough of them forced a small splash onto the blue paper gown. My attention faded in and out as Dr. B described the fetus at its stage of development. She harped on the importance of lifestyle choices—smoking, drinking, and drugs—though I had denied the last two on the patient form.

All I remember saying was, “Yes, ma’am,” over and over in the correct pauses. I must have started sobbing then, because Nurse Karen handed me the whole box of tissue.

“We’ll scoot on out and let you get dressed, give you a few minutes.” She picked up my chart and slid out the door with Dr. B behind her.

I sat there for short while crying until I coaxed myself to dry up get it together. I might spend all day bawling, but I couldn’t do it here. Jumping down from the table, I landed so heavy the furniture shook. I tore off the gown and threw away my paper coverings. I cleaned up and got dressed one leg at a time, just like hours before.

Working my feet back into my brown leather Mary Jane heels, I stood upright and got dizzy. The room grew dim, and bright specks like lightning bugs flew in circles around me. I walked over to the sink and gripped the sides. In the mirror I saw a little girl painted with make up, red splotches covering her nose and cheeks, mascara running. All my life I had wanted to look older, act older, be older. Here I had gone off and put myself in the position of a grown woman, and now I had to deal with grown consequences. But I didn’t know how. There was no sweet talking my way out of this

one. No amount of extra credit would make up for such a stupid mistake. I couldn't give up my phone and my car to earn my innocence back. I couldn't lie to myself and wait for the problem to fade away.

Splashing water on my face, I wiped at the smeared the black streaks. I dabbed my face dry and looked at my reflection, blue eyes bloodshot but familiar. I wanted to see what I looked like saying it.

"I'm pregnant."

The tears came back full-on, and the red splotches bled together across my eyes and nose like a musketeer mask. I wept so hard I could barely catch my breath.

Knock, knock.

"Just. A. Minute." I blotted my face with the damp paper towel and tried to regulate my breathing. Inhale, exhale. Slower. Inhale, exhale.

Dr. B knocked again and opened the door. I heard Nurse Karen working up a new patient down the hall. Dr. B came in alone holding a packet of information. She stood an arm's length away, waiting for me to compose myself.

"Your due date is around late May, but we'll need an ultrasound to be sure." She held out a baggie of various colored pamphlets. "You can schedule your prenatal care with us if you like."

I didn't say *yes, ma'am* this time. I said, "That won't be necessary." Then I reached passed Dr. B for a handful of tissue, picked up my purse and slid out the door. I left her standing there with one white coated arm extended, offering me truths about a baby I didn't want to exist.

SPIKING TOBACCO

This was something you tell a man to his face. I pulled in next to Josh's black Ford Ranger, praying he wasn't inside so I could just tuck a note under his windshield wiper. Not a sweet little note to say I'm pregnant. I wasn't that mean. In my note on folded scratch paper, I simply asked him to call me. Then added, "URGENT!" I never said that. When he called, I would ask him to come see me in person.

One of the tractors had broken down and sat idle next to Josh's pick-up. I got out and heard nothing but cicadas in the surrounding woods. Nobody in the truck, I decided to check the rusted metal garage where the Barnhills kept all the farm equipment. A film of dust hazed over the window of the steel entry door. I knocked and tried the knob. It turned, so I let myself in.

"Hello?"

No response. The cavernous place was scattered with machine parts and tool boxes and kitty litter soaking up oil spots on the concrete floor. It smelled of grease and sawdust, like my daddy. When I heard a vehicle pull up outside, I came back out hoping to see Josh or someone who could take me to him. Besides vegetables, Barnhill also raised a few acres of tobacco, but I didn't know where the fields were planted. I only knew it all had to be harvested and hung to cure by sundown or the whole crop would wilt into nothing under the early frost.

"Hey, Tree." I waved, trying to act normal.

"Hi there, Miss Candice. You lookin' for your ole man?" He meant Josh.

Jimmy Valerie, everybody called him “Tree,” got out of a rusted green farm truck. He stood almost seven feet tall– skinny with long limbs and hands like bunches of bananas. About as country as they come, Jimmy had a gentle face with deep set eyes and week’s worth of reddish-brown stubble. Like most hunters I knew, he had let his beard grow for cold weather. He wore a ragged t-shirt under beige Carhart bib overalls. A few years older than Josh, they ran around together sometimes and both worked for Barnhill through the harvest season.

“Yeah. You seen him?”

“He’s up in the back field workin’ like a dog. Damn tractor broke down, so they up there cuttin’ stalks by hand, him and a bunch ‘a Mexicans. I come to get the hangin’ trailers.” He pointed behind me to two flatbeds loaded with three-inch steel pipe scaffolding ten feet off the ground. “We gotta get them cut stalks hung up to dry ‘fore they sit too long in the sun.”

“Where’s the back field? I just need to talk to Josh real quick.”

“I tell you what, if you can wave me back to hitch up this trailer, I’ll take you to him. Won’t be a few minutes to load the spikes, and I’ll bring you back when I come after the other trailer.”

“Sounds good.”

He reversed the old Ford, a late fifties model that used to be mint green with a white stripe down the side, now just a rusted out farm truck, I directed him back. I pointed left and straightened him up until the silver ball aligned with the hitch.

“Whoa.” I held up both palms flat. Looking at the back of my hands, I recognized a familiar resemblance to my mothers, blue veins running to my knuckles,

long slender fingers. I wondered what she would say, if she always knew I would get knocked up in high school.

Jimmy got out and cranked the hitch down until the bed of the truck sagged under the weight. He clipped on a chain and said, “A’ yight. Let’s go.”

I opened the passenger door, not even thinking about my off-white dress pants on the tar smeared seat.

“Here. Sit on this.” Jimmy tossed me towel. “Might not be much better, but its somethin’.”

“Thanks.” I spread it out and climbed in, comfortable with the rusted out floorboards. I may wear name brand clothes, but I could get down right redneck when the time called for it.

“You skippin’ school?”

“Not this time.” It was a probable question, but I had an honest excuse. “I had a doctor’s appointment.” Giving no more, I looked out the window at the passing fence posts and fidgeted with the lock knob sticking up from the door.

~

The first thing I did when I left the doctor’s office twenty minutes ago, was light up a cigarette. I put in a Beatles CD and turned up “Here Comes the Sun.” Far from the girl who’d traveled the same road just an hour and a half before, I pulled onto the highway headed back toward the Tennessee state line. Like an idiot, I had batted my eyes and mouthed thank you’s. I didn’t even care about the homecoming crown anymore. I would drop out of the race, discreetly, so no one asked why. What kind of

girl worth her salt wants to be a pregnant homecoming queen? That's just trashy, and it kind of defeats the purpose.

If anyone found out, I would lose all popularity status. In my hometown, talk of scandal spread like brushfire in the middle of summer drought, from the backwoods to the post office to the old lady's beauty shop on the court square in town. I couldn't tell anybody. Well at least one person would have to know. I'd need a ride. And I would have to schedule the procedure somewhere out of town, on a Friday so I could play sick and recover over the weekend.

I didn't want to tell Josh, not that he would try and stop me. He knew better than to try and stop me from doing anything. I just wanted to take care of things my way, without having to consider anyone else. Years from now, I would look back at this like a speed bump on my road to college, one thousands of girls like me ran over full speed without considering the damage. I knew of some who'd done it more than once, talked about it like returning a sweater.

With only eight months left of senior year, Josh and I were going to end it anyhow. While I finished school, he picked up day labor, biding time. Instead of waiting until summer, I would just break up with him early, make up some reason about getting too attached. He'd reply with an innocent remark, and I would turn it around—fly off the handle, tell him I didn't want to love him so hard, claim he should go on up to Missouri, convince him it was all his idea in the first place. Josh would disappear and never have to know.

This was my problem, and I didn't need his judgment clouding mine with murky swirls of worry added to my plate. No thank you. I had my fill and then some.

I thought about all the drugs I had done since August: hits of acid, bags of weed, countless cigarettes, and that one beer I drank at the lake—damn double negative. This thing inside me was better off spared. Dr. B said the first and most important stages of brain development already began. I knew I already fucked it up for sure.

No baby deserved to have me for a mother. And I didn't deserve to be one. I had life to live. Hell bent on making something of myself out in the "real world" all the adults kept warning about, I had to get out of this God forsaken place where everybody knew everybody else's business, but nothing ever happened.

Well, things were happening now. My pulse quickened at the thought of Dr. B telling my aunt Sandy. Surely one of those forms I skimmed and signed back in the waiting room was a confidentiality agreement. Even so, I was still a minor. I had no rights to privacy as far as I knew. Before the p-word even fell out of the doctor's mouth, Aunt Sandy would be on the phone with Daddy.

"Weh-ull, Candice done run off with that boy and got in trouble," she would say.

"I'm gonna shoot him," Daddy would reply. I pictured his thick hands pulling the shotgun his granddaddy left him from its place above the mantle. Or maybe he'd shoot me first. Truth was I really had no idea what he'd do. Daddy could never know. Just a few more months, and I would be out from under his reign forever.

Stopping at the last red light on the way out of Murray, Kentucky, I looked up at the wispy afternoon clouds through my tinted moon roof. A butterfly sticker I'd put up days before caught the sunlight and glowed like stained glass. The wings spread wide as my palm. They were outlined in black and separated by a thin body. One depicted a blue and purple sky surrounding the Tree of Life in full bloom. The other showed hues of

blended red and pinks and a golden sunset over the sea. I felt pricks of guilt for wanting to make sure the thing forming inside me never saw the light. I pictured its soul as a ribbon of smoke getting sucked back into a jeweled genie bottle, laying in wait.

When traffic moved in front of me, the highway narrowed to two lanes. I cranked my window all the way down and stubbed out my cigarette. An autumn breeze carried in the smell of burning brush, the aftermath of harvest season.

I worried about my own soul. Brought up with the fire and brimstone of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church, I knew abortion was a sin. Then again, I had fornicated, so that was a sin, too. I wondered if different transgressions held different weights, maybe a point system. Or was it a row of tic marks where all transgressions counted equal, like if saying “Goddamn” carried as much weight as killing somebody, and you just had to make it in under a certain number? Next to my name in the book of life, there would be thousands, not grouped by fives with the diagonal slash, but single marks straight like dominoes lined up long enough to wrap around the world, probably twice.

When I was nine, I got born again, dunked in the baptismal with a painted backdrop of the River Jordan behind the choir pews. All my family came to watch; they made up a quarter of the congregation and sang “Just As I Am” from the red hymnals. Grandma gave me a golden cross necklace and a dollar. When a dark haired, round preacher in a soaked white robe beckoned me into the big blue Jacuzzi tub, I waded over and looked out at all the beaming faces. Mamma cried. The preacher praised Jesus and placed his hand in the small of my back.

“Candice came down front after Sunday service a few weeks ago and accepted Jesus Christ into her heart.” His voice rose and fell in reverent rhythm over the crowd.

“This child told me, she said, ‘Brother Ron, I want to do right in my life and I love God and I want go to heaven.’”

His hand moved to my shoulder, and he looked me straight in the eyes. I hoped he couldn't see how much I loved all the attention, like I had done it all for the spotlight. It sounded like something I would do, but Mama told me if I got baptized for the wrong reasons, the Lord knew so and it wouldn't take. But I had done it for the right reason. During alter call after Sunday evening service, we sang “Old Rugged Cross” and tears came up so thick in my eyes I couldn't hold them in. I didn't know why because I had sung that hymn a hundred times before and nothing happened. Standing there next to my girl friend, I just started bawling. By the second verse, her mother put an arm around me and scooted my little body out in the aisle. Mama didn't even get to see it. She had signed up to work the nursery that night, but she heard my name through the baby monitor set up on the pulpit to pipe in the sermons. Brother Ron had asked me one question.

Standing there in the tub of warm water, he asked me the same question. “Do you truly believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?”

“Yes, sir. I believe it,” I said loud enough for everyone to hear, and I meant it.

“God sacrificed his only son to die on the cross and pay for our sins, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not parish, but have eternal life.”

Amens fluttered from the packed pews.

“Candice Renee Green, do you promise to uphold the truths in His word and serve the Lord all the days of your life?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then receive the Holy Ghost, child. We bless you, Father, for you...”

He gently held my nose and dipped me backward into the water. His prayer muffled into deep soothing vibrations. For a moment I was surrounded in dark, peaceful warmth— almost floating in it. White fireworks burst behind my closed eyelids. When the preacher lifted my neck, I emerged and wiped my eyes.

He boomed, “...Amen.”

The congregation returned in unison, and a few hollered out “Praise God.”

“Your slate has been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb,” the preacher told me.

God had forgiven me all my sins right then and there. But this would be the worst. I wondered if He would still accept me after this.

In the end, I would have to answer for it. I would also have to answer for every earring I shoplifted (individually or by the pair), every time I stole Momma’s car (I could count on both hands), every curse word I uttered (I had a filthy mouth for such a pretty girl), every lie I told (I could never remember them all), every time I had sex outside of marriage (more than I cared to admit), and thousands of other sins I committed since I reached the age of reason.

I would pay for every time I yelled, “God, Momma. I hate you.”

That’s taking the Lord’s name in vain and dishonoring my mother, two strikes in one. I didn’t need some kid growing up, saying that to me. If God knew all the things I’d done, He’d never let me into Heaven anyway. What was one more?

Leaves had begun to change, but few had fallen. All around the acres of clean cut fields, yellow and orange and red patches quilted in the green tree line. Lush kudzu vines

had ceased their annual creep along roadside embankments and up telephone poles. In the cooler weather, they withered into lengths of twine haphazardly tossed over vast stretches of land. I loved the picturesque gifts of nature and wide open space, but I still had a lot of get left in me. I couldn't settle for small town life, so simple, where everything revolved around the same people I had known forever.

I wanted enlightenment. I wanted adventure. I wanted everything. All the time. And I was willing to work for it.

A few miles down the road in Puryear, on the left passed the one red light in town, a turn-off led to the lake highway where a windy road about half way down led to straight to my driveway. I figured it would take less time than going through town, and besides I didn't want anyone to see me, as if I looked pregnant but it would come off with a good wash. Slowing down to thirty-five miles an hour in the speed trap, I coasted through the yellow light just in time.

This road also led to Barnhill's vegetable farm where Josh said he'd be all day cutting and spiking tobacco for eighty dollars cash. I questioned how much "the procedure" would cost, the going rate for that sort of thing. I had a little money. In my dollars for A's savings account, one Grandma had set up for me at Commercial Bank that paid me one dollar for every A on my report card since the sixth grade, I calculated roughly two hundred bucks. If that wasn't enough, I could figure out the money.

I pulled into the old cinderblock gas station on the corner. To the right, the short cut to my house wound into a valley of plowed fields. Straight ahead, Barnhill's land spread over a hundred acres, with the entrance just a few miles down the road.

Josh had contributed as much to the problem as I did. And when it came right down to it, he deserved to know. This thing was half his. If I had to deal with the guilt of my mortal soul, so did he.

I wondered what his face would look like when I told him, if he would cry like I did, tears seeping from the corners of his seed-shaped hazel eyes, across his summer freckles, down into the edges of his trimmed goatee—if he would taste the salt. I had never seen a cowboy cry.

Would his broad-backed frame furl up, or would he curse at the sky? He might just wipe his face with the back of his sleeve and go on, take off without so much as a “fuck you.” Nothing. He didn’t plan on sticking around much longer as it was.

~

When Jimmy pulled the trailer off the crunching gravel onto a washed out dirt road, my petite body bounced up and down in the cab. I gripped the dashboard for balance. He eased to a stop near a clearing, but I couldn’t see any field hands. Jimmy kept his hands on the steering wheel and turned his long face toward me.

“You pregnant, ain’t cha’?”

The words just hung. For the first time in my life, the answer was yes. I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath. If I lied, it would mean another tick mark added by my name. I wondered if he could smell it on me like a dog in heat, but I didn’t nod or say either way. My silence answered for me.

“I know’d it as soon as you got in the truck. I seen that look plenty lately. Jessica’s had two miscarriages in the last four months.”

Jimmy's wife was also tall and stout as any man in town. They had eloped last year in the mountains of Gatlinburg and now lived in a sixteen foot camper trailer up on cinder blocks in her daddy's side yard. Once when they invited us over to watch a movie, Josh and I sat on the booth/sofa eating the Jiffy Pop. I wondered how far their legs hung over the bed in the back room. When Jessica told me they'd been trying to have a baby, I congratulated her, but I couldn't for the life of me understand why she wanted a child when they barely had enough room for themselves. It would probably come out four feet long. Where would they even put it? And here I was living in Daddy's four bedroom house, wanting to get rid of a baby while they were going through so much heartache to have one.

"Please, don't tell Josh. I wanted him to be the only one to find out."

"I won't say nothin' to nobody."

Jimmy drove farther down the road to a split in the tree line. The air in the cab thickened with unspoken anxiousness like a thousand mosquitoes swarming around. We rode for a short piece until I couldn't stand it anymore, "Jimmy, just tell me everything's gonna be okay." Like he could know, but I wanted to hear it.

"It ain't none a my business, but I think Josh is a helluva guy. He'll do right by you."

"He is a good guy," I said. Until then, I had not considered his real part in all this.

In the clearing ahead, a couple dozen men hunched over their tobacco hatchets. All I could see were groups of curved backs, thick rounded nubs of flannel and orange camouflage, bobbing. Workers chopped the broad leafy stalks close to the ground,

pausing less than a second to watch them fall like seven foot timber, and advanced for a go at the next one.

A row of men trailed behind them, working over piles of cut tobacco wilting in the sun to soften. Each man held a long wooden stick like a shovel handle, but with a pointed metal spike screwed on the end, raised to the sky. One at a time, they picked up a thick stalk of tobacco and shoved it down on the spike, piercing it through the center. They slid the plant down like meat on a kabob and a streak of brown, sticky tar smeared down the wood. When the stick was full, they found another one and spiked it all over again. I'd heard stories of men who accidentally chopped their ankles or pierced their palm by mistake. I cringed at the thought of forcing my own hand onto a steel point, breaking the skin of my own accord, pushing with all my weight.

Jimmy parked in the shade close as he could to the field line so they wouldn't have far to tote the crop. It looked good this year—pale green, wide tapering leaves, no black rot, hardly any bugs. But none of it would be any count at if they didn't get it put up today. After the frost, the customary Southern fall drenches would set in. Those fine plants would stand in the wet field and get too ripe, leaves so brittle they break off with the slightest nudge. I couldn't imagine putting months of work into a crop just to watch it crumble under your feet, useless.

"I'm gonna unhitch this trailer." Jimmy got out, and I followed him around to the front of the truck. He pointed to a red flannel working on a pile of stalks about twenty yards away. "There's Josh right up yonder, workin' the spikes."

I yelled his name, but for once, my voice didn't carry far enough. I watched a shadow make its way across the land like a cool bed sheet; a heavy cloud moved in front of the sun and lingered.

Jimmy cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered, "Hey, Burton!"

The red flannel froze. Josh's heated face peeked out from under a black ball cap.

I stood beside that worn out Ford, in my blue chenille sweater and dress pants, waving my arms like a stranded survivor to a rescue plane.

When he saw me, Josh stood up, wiped his brow on his shirtsleeve, and came walking toward me with an exhausted saunter. I started him off his way. My brown leather heels sank in the earth. With each step, I anticipated a different response: "I thought you were on the pill," "You're getting an abortion," "I ain't got the money," "You ain't killin' no seed of mine," "Give it up for adoption," "I love you. Will you marry me?"

When the cloud passed, all I could make out was his black silhouette in the white of the sun. Josh was just shy of six feet, broad-chested with a boyish face. What I was about to say would change his life forever. I felt the power of it all, like I was about to toss a hand grenade.

That afternoon in early October 1997, we met each other half way in the middle of Barnhill's tobacco field. My eyes matched the blue of my sweater. My face had returned to its natural color, but I could feel the tears coming, the splotches creeping up the surface. I swallowed hard as Josh's face came into focus. Usually I greeted him with a kiss right off, but he was covered in mud and tar smudges from his work boots up to the damp ring around the neck of his t-shirt. He took off his hat and scratched his head.

Even in the cool weather, his hair darkened and curled with sweat just above his ears. He nodded like he understood when I kept an arm's distance.

"Hey." He slipped the handle of his hatchet into the hammer loop on his cargo jeans and pulled off his work gloves. "You look nice."

"Thanks." I thought I might as well get on with it. "Just came from the doctor."

"What'd you find out?"

"Six to eight weeks." I looked into his sly eyes for some sort of epiphany.

"What? You have to go back?"

"No." I tried to swallow it back, but moisture reflected the light until the scene became a kaleidoscope of fall colors. I blinked and cleared it away. There he stood before me—Josh the father. His eyes widened and his forehead wrinkled like I'd just woken him from a nightmare. But it wasn't the end of a bad dream, only the beginning. "I'm six to eight weeks pregnant."

"How?"

"You know *how*."

"I thought you was on the pill." Right on my first guess.

"I was, but I took antibiotics when I was sick. I didn't know that cancels it out.

You remember that day I stayed home from school and you came over and we—"

"But you took a test. Two of 'em."

"It must have been too early to tell."

"You're sure? I mean," he scuffed his boot over a tobacco stump severed clean, "the doctor said exactly, 'You're pregnant?'"

“No, Josh.” I didn’t mean to snap at him, but he knew better than to think I’d be standing there if I wasn’t sure. My solid voice cracked into a whimper. “The doctor said, ‘Your uterus is six to eight weeks swollen.’”

Josh folded his arms across his chest and looked off into the woods. Hazel eyes all green-flecked and crazy, he stared like he could start a fire in the brush. He blinked hard and looked away as if something had blinded him. He looked at the ground and did the same thing again. Shifting to his back foot, he dropped his hands to his hips. Josh looked at me, exhaled a deep breath, and turned up to the sky like he was asking God a question. I thought of a million. As I watched him, the traces of the wild, country boy with all his ropes and rides and freedom morphed into something else, something I recognized but could not identify.

I stood back to give Josh some room. Wiping my nose with tissue from the doctor’s office, I shut my eyes tight and watched red squiggles race through blackness. A single tear dropped down and splattered, leaving a tiny wet sunburst on my dirty shoe. I covered my face with my hands and swore to myself I wouldn’t disintegrate into heaving sobs like before in the exam room mirror, when I had watched the girl excited by a rhinestone tiara fade away.

No more tears. I had to act grown, strong. This time I let out short stifled breaths. Passing workmen lugged their loaded tobacco sticks on their shoulders. I squatted down and hugged my knees but didn’t sit. I just rocked back and forth for a minute. Josh’s voice made me stand up straight.

“Well,” he said.

“Well?” I wanted his help more than anything.

“I guess this means it’s me and you from here on out.”

I threw my arms around his neck, tar stains be damned. Feeling the warmth of him, I folded up and tucked my body into his chest. He squeezed me tight and rested his head on mine. I had never felt love like that before. Someone accepted all of me, every fault and problem, even though he didn’t have to.

“What are we gonna do,” I asked. It sounded like somebody else talking.

“Let’s not decide right off.” He kissed the top of my head. “We got some time to it figure out.”

“Not a whole lot,” I said, pulling back to look into his eyes. “Let’s make a decision one week from today.” I only had a month left in the first trimester. After that, the procedure didn’t come so cheap or so easy.

“Don’t tell nobody,” he said.

“Jimmy knows.”

“You told him?” Josh backed up like I threatened to slap him in the face.

“He guessed,” I said. “With me all cryin’, comin’ to see you out here in the middle of the day. But I didn’t say yes or no.”

“Well don’t tell nobody else until we decide what to do.” He moved closer.

A whistle came from the direction of the truck. Jimmy was ready to go.

“You still goin’ to the dance tonight?”

I had all but forgotten about homecoming. “I better, or people will talk. I got nominated for queen.”

I remember very little of my senior homecoming dance: An Evening in Paris. The head cheerleader won the crown. I posed for a picture with my date in front of a canvas backdrop painted by the art class—a ceiling to floor scene of stone buildings along the Thames, dozens of French flags waving from gray facades. Already two years out of school, Josh had no use for homecoming dances, and I didn't blame him. I went with my buddy from algebra, Boone Michael, voted wittiest in the senior superlatives.

Boone stood a head and a half taller than me with a husky build twice my size. He had pale skin covered in freckles and crazy curly hair the color of sweet potato pie, pulled back in a ponytail and a trimmed goatee to match. He looked uncomfortable cleaned up in a black vest and dress pants.

I rejected my plan to go all out glamorous. No chandelier earrings, no gleaming pendant, no beaded chain belt, no arm-length gloves. I wore my gown plain—sleeveless, solid white from the high neckline to the floor. I didn't even curl my hair; instead, I twisted it back in a loose bun and pulled a few tendrils around my face. With a soft glow, I tried to fade into the crowd, silent, invisible. Maybe no one would notice.

“What's wrong with you,” they kept asking.

My head slightly tilted, I smiled pretty for the camera and held Boone's thick fingers with a fish-hand grasp. Before my waist, I positioned my wrist corsage of red and white roses, trying to cover my transgression with dainty flowers. There was no way I had started to show at two months along, but I prayed I wasn't standing there in my plain white gown, in the middle of my senior homecoming dance, looking all pregnant. The picture turned out nice, and you couldn't see if you weren't looking hard, but in all that plainness, the desperation of my secret gleamed brighter than anything.

FROM HERE ON OUT

Josh and I told Daddy we were going to the movies, but we rode out to the lake where the Tennessee River meets Little Eagle Creek. Josh parked near the water at a place everybody called Sandy Beach, but there was no sand. Thousands of pebbles the size of peas turned into sinking mud about six feet out. But we didn't get in the water. Josh turned off his headlights and we cranked the windows down. When he flipped the key backward, all the gauges fell dim and we sat in the dark. Tree frogs croaked mating calls from the surrounding woods. The air smelled like fish.

I waited for Josh to start. I didn't want to be the first to cast my opinion, but we needed to get on with it.

"So what do you want to do?" I said it like I was asking where we would go out to eat on Friday night. "I mean, how do you wanna handle this?"

"What do you want to do?" Josh was a master at answering a question with a question.

"The way I figure it, we have three options." I drew one leg up under me and turned to face him. "I can't give it up for adoption."

"Why not?" he asked. "I think we should consider everything."

"You know me better than anybody. I can't even get rid of a stray puppy."

When Josh had found a shaggy white mutt on the side of the road, Daddy said she could stay until I found her a home. I washed her up and named her Gypsy and put her on a long chain in the back yard. She got all the table scraps and learned to fetch a tennis ball. One morning I walked out to find the chain empty. Gypsy had grown strong and

stayed true to her name, and I moped around for days worrying she got run over on the highway.

“We ain’t talkin’ about a dog.” Josh squared his body to mine and half chuckled.

“Exactly.” I pulled up my other leg and sat indian-style. My favorite jeans stretched tight on my thighs. “It would be like one of those Lifetime movies where the biological mother changes her mind at the last minute.”

“You don’t think you could handle it?”

“I’m not gonna go through pregnancy—disappoint my family, my friends—and come out with nothing to show for it.” I looked down into my lap. “I know myself. There’s no way I could carry a baby around inside my body for nine months and then just give it away.” My hands offered up empty air and then found his arm. “I can’t give away a tiny person made like me and you. I’m just not strong that way.”

A sliver of moonlight reflected off the lake, enough to make out Josh’s hand on the steering wheel. He held up his thick fingers. “So that leaves two options.”

“Josh, look, I’m almost off probation. This is my last year of high school, my last year of insane controlling parents always telling me what to do. Next fall, I’ll be living on campus, rushing a sorority. I wanna study abroad, maybe somewhere in Europe.” My long-term plan was to climb the corporate ladder until I got the top floor corner office and make boatloads of money. I would leave this town in my dust.

Dropping my legs down, my feet knocked around an empty Coke bottle in the floorboard. I turned to stare out into the blackness.

“So you wanna get rid of it?” Josh looked me dead on, the kind of stare you can feel. When I glanced over, half his face lay in shadow, but both eyes returned dots of moonlight.

“I’m just being realistic.” I drew a hand to my chest. “I have a plan, and a kid is not part of it.”

“You think you’re strong enough for that?”

Having a fetus scraped out of me would hurt, not just physically. But it was legally still only a fetus. In biology, I had learned about the stages of human reproduction. I heard the debates on the news, watched on the screen as opposing sides rallied and protested their positions on when exactly a fetus was considered a human life. I didn’t have the answer to that question.

But I wondered how many of those specialists and activists ever got knocked up in high school. How many had ever done one too many drugs one too many times before they found out? How many had gotten into trouble with the law but cleaned up and worked their way clean with only a few months until freedom? Did they really know what it was like to have to choose?

“Yeah. I’m strong enough for that.” My young, healthy body could make it through a D and C. I questioned, though, if after I walked out of the abortion clinic, I would be able to convince myself it was just a procedure. “In the state of Tennessee, you have to have at least one parent’s permission. So I called Momma today.”

“Did she flip out?”

I had called her at work from a borrowed cell phone at my friend’s house after school. Daddy listened in on my calls at home; he always knew what was going on. I

didn't want to take the chance. While my friend fixed pizza rolls in the kitchen, I locked myself in the plain upstairs guest room and opened the mini blinds. My hands shook. I dialed twice and hung up before I finally let it ring.

"Hello, this is Judy." She always answered like a client was calling.

"Hi, Mom." I tried to sound chipper, but my voice cracked.

"Hey, honey. How was homecoming? I never got a call, so I guessed you didn't want to talk about it."

"Well, I'm ready to talk." I smiled when I got nervous. I wondered if she could hear it. "Um, I didn't win queen, but I had a doctor's appointment."

"Your father didn't tell me. Are you alright?"

I took in as much air as my lungs could hold, and blew out fast.

"Momma, you remember when I was born, and the nurse said those three little words that made you scream?" She had told me the story a thousand times.

"It's a girl?"

"Those were the words." I covered my mouth and waited.

"Oh God, Candice, no."

"Yes." I sat on the quilted bedspread and felt the mattress sink beneath me.

"How far along?"

"Six to eight weeks."

"Does Josh know? It is *his*, isn't it?"

"Of course, Momma. I'm not a slut."

"And?"

"We're gonna ride out to Sandy Beach tonight and talk about things."

“That’s where I lost my virginity to your father.”

“Gross. Please don’t tell me things like that.”

“Well if you’re old enough get in trouble, you’re old enough to hear about it.”

The line stayed silent long enough for me to wonder if the connection dropped.

“Hello?” I examined the phone, shook it, and put it back to my ear.

“I’m still here. Does your father know?”

“No. Josh and I want to talk about it first.” Momma and Daddy hadn’t lived together in years, but they had always teamed up trying to keep me in line. I guess that didn’t work out like they thought. “But if we decide not to keep it, I don’t want Daddy ever finding out.”

Momma talked like she had known it was coming. “Well, you’ll have to go somewhere out of town. I think there’s a place down here, but you can’t miss any school.” She let out a sigh. “I knew it. I told him if he kept you all caged up, something like this would happen.”

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A humid breeze blew in off the lake and fogged up the windshield. Josh lit a cigarette. In the flame of the lighter, I saw he looked hurt, like I’d taken a step without him.

“Sounds like you already made up your mind.”

I had babysat enough to know I could handle school-age kids but wanted nothing to do with babies. They were too small and delicate. Give me a kid who loved hide-and-seek and went potty all by himself, I could go for hours. But babies required real work, a

degree of gentleness that made me nervous. They had soft spots and weak necks and rashes I couldn't pronounce. And they put everything in their mouths.

You had to feed them and change them and follow them around cleaning up their messes. On the holidays at Grandma's house, I had four little cousins who got all the attention—toddling slobbering poop monsters, doted over when they ate homemade macaroni and cheese—so cute how they smeared it all over their fat faces and opened their mouths for more.

“A baby would ruin my life.” I didn't need some little snot ball tethering me to the ground.

“A baby would ruin your plan.”

“It would ruin your plan, too.” I turned back to the open window, took in the cool outside air. “You wanna get outta' here, just as bad as I do.”

“Say we go our separate ways, who's to say things'll work out like we plan? We live day to day, never knowing' what's gonna happen next.”

“There's nothing wrong with working toward goals.”

“That's true. But if we're gonna talk about the first two options, we gotta think about the third.” He tapped three fingers on my thigh.

“That's what you want?”

“I ain't sayin that's what I want. I'm sayin we should talk about it.”

Over the last week, I had pushed all those thoughts right out of my mind. Sometimes in the shower, I caught myself wondering what it would look like. Of course, it would be gorgeous, with my big blue eyes and his perfectly rounded nose. It would have blonde hair and freckles. I'd dress it up in tie-died onzies and tiny tennis shoes with

teeny-weeny socks. Then I turned the water hot and forced away those thoughts, because somehow, dressing it up made the whole thing seem real—less like a fetus, more like my baby.

“You know how my family is. We’d have to get married.” I jerked my head around.

“Oh, I know that.” Josh shifted in the seat. “Say we did, I don’t wanna raise a kid in no city.”

“I agree. Life’s too fast, and it needs to grow up around family. We’d get a place around here, and I could go to Murray State in a few years.” It was a decent school about half hour away. “I could get my business degree, maybe work at the bank.” At four stories, the bank was tallest building in town.

“My buddy has a full-time construction crew, a year round job with insurance.”

“Eventually, you could start your own contracting business; I’d keep the books.”

“Build us a nice cabin out here by the lake.”

“With a wrap-around porch and a bay window where you can look out and see fog on the water. And all our friends can come over whenever we want.”

“Now you’re just wishin’.” Josh nudged me.

“No I’m not.” Yes I was. “It was your idea, anyway.” I changed the subject. “Can you imagine, waking up next to each other every morning, not having to worry about my daddy or anything else keepin’ us apart?”

“We wouldn’t be able to just go and do whatever we wanted.”

“You’d have to give up huntin’ and fishin’ so much. I’m not gonna be stuck at home with a kid all the time.”

“We’d both have to make sacrifices.” He got quiet. The croaking tree frogs took over, and we sat there, not looking at each other but out our separate windows.

“Have you prayed about it?” I had asked God everyday for a sign.

“For me, it seems kinda’ stupid to ask for another sign. I’ve asked for so many, and things just keep hap’nen the way they do.”

“How do you mean?”

“Think about it, Candice. A few months ago, I had my truck all packed up to head outta town, prayin’ about what to do with my future. I stayed here because God promised if I did, my life would change forever. I’m just thinkin’, maybe all this was s’posed to happen.”

“But I dropped acid.”

“And then Miss Brenda danced over you at church.”

After a night of partying at Mommas, I was running late getting back to Paris. Daddy wouldn’t get mad if I told him I went to church. At Sunday evening service at the Pentacostal Church, I slipped into the back pew. Miss Brenda danced down front, twirling her floor-length skirt like a maiden. It shimmered in metallic red and gold and blue, like the Hosanna banners on the wall. She shook her tambourine as she danced up the aisle, grabbed my arm, and led me down to the altar. I started to panic, thinking maybe the Lord told her I had done drugs, and now I had to confess my sins before the whole church.

“Lay down here,” she instructed over the band. “The Lord wants me to dance over you.” She spread her arms, coaxing me to the floor.

“Open your heart to the Holy Spirit.” Miss Brenda reached under her brown curls and removed a cloth from her shoulders. “This tallit, is like a prayer blanket.” I thought surely He was punishing me. Miss Brenda spoke in tongues as she tossed the tallit. It floated down over my body like a bed sheet. As I closed my eyes, the drums quickened and the piano rang out and the tambourine jingled and I thought my heart was going to pound out of my chest. I could see vague shadows of Miss Brenda’s hands waving over me.

“Devil, you’ll *not* take this child, in the name of Jesus.”

Silent tears ran into the cups of my ears. I stayed still, covered, and repented in a whisper, praying for God to cleanse me. Miss Brenda called on the congregation to join her in casting out the demons. With shrill, angry voices, faithful believers, cursed the devil and claimed me for good.

Two weeks later, I leaned out Josh’s truck window and searched for the moon, but too much cloud cover left only a dim glow, barely enough to cast a reflection on the lake. I touched my abdomen and thought about the life growing inside—a slippery body with arms and legs and fingers and toes.

“What if we have a baby?” I said.

We weighed the pros and cons for hours. I drew a t-chart with my finger on the foggy windshield—a tick-mark tally on each side, but some reasons held more bearing than others.

Plus: love, baby, less guilt, new wardrobe

Minus: telling Daddy, pregnancy, social humiliation, responsibility,
finances, maternity clothes

“So let’s decide,” he said. “What do you wanna’ do?”

“What do you wanna do?” I used his tactic.

“It’s your body. And I know when it comes down to it, you’re gonna do whatever you want with your body. There ain’t nothin’ I can do to stop you.”

“I wanna have the baby.” I knew it as sure as I knew my own name.

Josh put his hand on my knee, not sexy but gentle. I laid mine on his. I could barely see the outline of his strong jaw in all that was left of the moonlight.

TELLING DADDY

A baby coming in seven months seemed like forever in teen years. More than stretch marks or labor pains, I dreaded telling my daddy. But I couldn't hide it long.

"Hey." I greeted Josh at the door. No hug.

"Hey." He kept an arm's distance and followed me into the living room.

In a red polo and his best jeans, Josh sat beside me, leaving enough room between us for the Holy Ghost. Daddy read the paper at the kitchen bar, just out of my view. I smoothed the hem of my brown sweater dress and crossed my legs. We pretended to watch television.

Josh had agreed to man up and came to my house and sat on the country-blue couch next to me while I told my father his little girl had gotten herself in the family way with the very cowboy he'd forbid her to see months before. I wanted to be the one to say it out loud. But I wanted Josh to be there, take some of the blame, possibly serve as an eye witness.

"Daddy, we need to talk to you." I would be doing the talking.

My adrenaline kicked in so hard I could have lifted the couch with one hand, but instead I clicked the off button on the remote control. This deserved complete attention.

"You might want to sit down." I felt like an idiot saying something so cliché.

Daddy had worked all day reading gas meters. He loved his job, but hated the one day a month he spent walking all over town into people's yards, especially the ones with dogs. No putting this off until tomorrow, I'd already jumped in feet first. At forty-six years old, Daddy's once red hair receded just an inch or so, but the gray and years of

working outdoors had lightened it up. His skin had grown leathery, and his neck looked sunburned even in winter. Daddy eased himself down into his blue recliner and let out a sigh. From the collar of his unbuttoned navy work shirt, he pulled out his sunglasses and laid them on the side table. The years of days like this had taken its toll on him, but I was no fool.

With the solid oak coffee table separating us from him, I sat more than an arm's reach away. Make him mad, and my daddy was five-feet ten inches of redheaded cock fight, and I knew I was in the wrong.

I couldn't lead out with the "three little words" speech I had used on Momma. Daddy wouldn't see it as humor softening the blow; he would think I was being a smart ass, like usual. But this was no time for joking. Or games. No rousing up tears—the sympathy act had long worn off.

This was our decision to have this baby. Josh and I had talked about it maturely, discussed all the factors, and agreed this was what we both wanted. Now I just had to come right out and say it plain, because if I wasn't brave enough to tell my father I got knocked up, I sure as hell wasn't brave enough to have a kid.

"How was your day, Daddy?" My softest tone floated out.

"Long." He bent over to unlace his work boots.

When I was little he asked me to pull his boots off for him. My little fingers untied the double knots and unhooked the laces from each side, loosened them up, pulled and tugged on the leather until I tumbled backwards on the blue carpet. Daddy liked the laces tucked in the tops, the heels lined up side by side against the wall. With my small thumbs, I rubbed the soles of his socked feet. Pocketing the quarter Daddy offered me, I

climbed up beside him in the big cushiony chair. He kicked it back, and we watched John Wayne movies where the cowboy always got the bad guy, and the girl.

I thought about offering to pull Daddy's boots off, but didn't want to get too close. The small talk continued until he freed his feet and relaxed. It was a good idea for everyone involved if he shed his steel toed boots.

"How was school?" Daddy tucked his laces, set his boots aside.

"Fine." In conversation with my father, I had become the queen of one word answers, so I tried to offer a little more. "I took a test on *The Scarlet Letter*. It was mostly essay, so I think I did pretty good."

"Josh, you work out by the lake today?" Daddy already knew. He kept tabs.

"Yes, sir. I'm puttin' on the roof at the new convention building at Paris Landing Inn."

"Roofin's hard work."

"Yes, sir."

"Now what is it y'all need to talk about?" Daddy loosened back in his chair. He put his elbows on the armrests and folded his hands across his stomach.

Bile rose up in the back of my throat, but I used the watery saliva in my mouth to swallow it down. I couldn't puke right there in the living room. Daddy wouldn't fetch me a bucket and a cool rag and tuck me in bed. He'd stand over me while I cleaned it up, only making things worse. I had to be strong, take him on. My eyes caught him square in the face.

"Daddy, I'm pregnant."

He stared back at me, each of us shifting focus from one eye to the other long enough for it to be uncomfortable. I refused to be the first to look away or break the silence.

“I was afraid you was gonna say that.” Daddy glared at Josh, stood up, and walked away in his socked feet.

“Should I run?” Josh whispered.

“Where you goin’, Daddy?” I called in my innocent voice, like he meant to fetch the salt for the dinner table. He was the kind of man who’d give a head start.

“My seventeen-year-old daughter just told me she’s pregnant,” he called back at me. “Where do you think I’m goin’?” A cabinet opened and closed.

Josh stood up.

“I’m gonna fix myself a drank.”

As Josh sat back down next to me, I shrank in relief. He took my hand, squeezed it once, and let go. Even after admitting we had sex, he had enough respect for Daddy to keep his hands to himself. I figured it better Daddy went for the liquor. He fixed a Jack and Coke every night when he got off work, always had a couple, but never crossed the line, not around me. I bet he mixed this one stiff.

Solo cup in hand, Daddy returned to his chair. He took a sip and wiped the drippings off his thick moustache. Sitting up straight we ran down the obvious call and response: Was I sure? Yes I was sure. How far along? Nine weeks. Didn’t I take the pills, the ones he paid for, forty dollars a month? Yes, but my prescription cancelled them out. Didn’t we use other protection? No, sir. Didn’t we know better? Yes, sir.

Then nobody said anything for long time.

“I could get mad and raise hell, but it won’t do no good.” Daddy set his cup down on the coffee table and propped his elbows on his knees like he wanted to hear the plan.

He talked to us like adults. “Now, then. What are y’all gonna do?”

I glanced at Josh for reassurance. He confirmed with a nod.

“We wanna have it.”

“Why?”

Daddy wouldn’t buy my belief in God’s devine plan. He’d think my reasoning was whimsical. Daddy was the kind of Christian who seldom attended church. When he did, the service was serious and reverent with hymnal books and silence in appropriate places. He also thought my preacher was a money-hungry fraud with a borderline cult following. I just called it Pentecostal.

“Because this is our decision.”

“What about college?”

“I’m still goin’ to college, just later.”

“Josh, what do you think about all this?” Daddy spoke like a man who had already played this out in his head.

“Well, sir, I’m willin’ to stand beside her no matter what.”

“So y’all gonna get married?”

“Of course,” I said, thinking it would earn redemption points. “Probably Christmas break while school’s out.”

“You’re livin’ at home until you graduate.”

“That’s fair.” My sweaty hands unclenched the sleeves of my dress.

Daddy pointed at Josh. “And you ain’t livin’ in my house until y’all are married. After the weddin’, y’all can move in downstairs and pay rent.”

“Then we’ll get our own place,” I added.

“How much longer you got on that roofin’ job?”

“‘Bout another month or so, depending on weather.”

“You got work lined up after that?”

“No, sir. But I got some money saved up from cuttin’ tobacco.”

“You’re gonna need a job with benefits, steady income if you’re gonna raise a family. I’ll ask around town, see if I can’t help you find somethin’.”

“I appreciate that.”

“And listen here. With my name out on the line, you better not make a fool outta’ me.”

“I’ll do right by you.” Josh promised. “And her.”

“This ain’t gonna be easy.” Daddy dropped his head.

“I know, Daddy.” I said it faintly to comfort him.

“Y’all got a long road ahead of you.”

“I know, Daddy.”

“It takes a lotta’ responsibility to do it. And do it right.”

“I know, Daddy.” Everything was planned out—the baby, the bank job, the cabin.

“Bet you think you got it all figured out.” He jerked up.

“No.” I knew Daddy could tell I was lying. “I know havin’ a baby’ll be hard, but we’re gonna’ do it together.” My shoulder pressed into Josh who didn’t move an inch.

“You know, huh?” Daddy stood up, and his voice filled the room. “You know what it’s gonna be like with a cryin’ baby who needs nursin’ and changin’ and feedin’ all the time?” Daddy pointed at Josh. “What are you gonna’ do when he’s workin’ long hours to put food on the table and y’all ain’t been out in weeks?” His forehead wrinkled in angry folds. “And don’t think for a minute I’m takin’ care of it. You made this decision, you raise it.”

“I’m not askin’ you to raise my child.” I could do a better job than he ever did, and I didn’t like him standing over me, so I came to my feet. “I know can handle it without you.”

“Godammit, Candice, you don’t know.” He brought his thick hand down on the oak table. The slap echoed off the walls. “Would you shut up a minute and quit tryin’ to fight me and just listen?” My daddy looked at me like just I broke his heart

My body fell back into the couch. I wanted to be little again, asking, “Daddy, what do I do?”

But he wouldn’t tell me. All this time, I had set my will so strong to defy him, run head-strong in the opposite direction of anything he offered. Now I had gotten myself so far down in a hole, even Daddy couldn’t dig in his boots and pull me out.

“There ain’t no way of knowin’ how hard it is till you been through it.”

With mouths closed and eyes wide, Josh and I stared up at Daddy.

“When you have a child, everything changes. Don’t matter what you want in this world, life ain’t about you no more. Every decision you make has to be about that baby. Not about you.”

SHOTGUN WEDDING ON DEPOT HILL

I didn't treat it like some scandalous secret. I sent a photo of Josh and me to the town paper, one of my senior pictures taken in the rose garden of the Paris Landing Inn just before I got pregnant. Ripples of the Kentucky Lake shimmered in the background. In my white linen shirt and jean shorts, I leaned back against Josh. He stood with his broad shoulders against a thick oak tree, his hand cupping my waist. I folded my arms across my chest and let him hold me up as I tried to project all my beauty to the camera. We looked like a couple who fit together.

Josh had dressed nice for the photo, gel in his brown hair parted down the middle. I tousled it a bit. He wore the navy collared shirt I'd picked out that showed off his muscled chest and arms, but not so tight it looked tacky. Josh lifted his chin like the photographer said, to get the shadow off my face.

The picture took up a quarter of page four, out of twelve, of the Paris Post-Intelligencer, next to Dear Abby. There must not have been much news that day. I wrote the announcement myself, using one from the previous week as a guide. I had no concept of wedding etiquette, that parents announced the marriage of their children. The editor must have reworded it for me: "Ronnie Green of Paris, Tennessee and Judy Hammond of Memphis, proudly announce the wedding of their daughter Candice Renee Green to Joshua Lee Burton at the Lighthouse Church on January 2, 1998. Services will take place at 7:00 pm." Then it goes on to tell how Daddy had worked at the Paris Natural Gas Company for the last 16 years, and Mom managed TopTalent Staffing Service in Memphis. But it only included the names of Josh's parents because they didn't do honest

work at the time—just drugs, mostly. It listed our ages, 17 and 20, that I was a senior on the honor roll at Henry County High School and he worked construction.

I might as well have titled it “Shotgun Wedding on Depot Hill.” Until years later, I didn’t realize how everybody in town must have read it and known about the baby, pitied the cute, young couple who had no idea how hard life would be. But all I knew was I was getting married Christmas break of my senior year, and this was the only wedding I would ever have, so by God, I deserved what every other girl got to experience, announcement in the paper and all. Then, we’d live happily ever after like those country songs about the feisty, rebellious girl who falls in love with the rough-neck cowboy. The day my nuptial plans ran in the paper, phone lines set fire. Folks around town called other folks who called my Grandma and my Aunt Sandy who scrambled to put together an emergency wedding shower.

Daddy stormed into the house stomping his work boots, rattling the antique tins perched on top of the cabinets. I sat at the wooden bar he’d built in the open space between the kitchen and the living room, the same place he and Josh and I had all agreed that a simple service at the Justice of the Peace would suffice. A few days later, I decided I wanted to get married in a church. Josh agreed. But I didn’t talk to Daddy about it. It wasn’t his wedding anyway. I didn’t expect him to pay for a thing—another part of the etiquette tradition I didn’t understand.

I had money saved up from my birthday, and I worked after school at Papa John’s Pizza. Brother Edgar said he’d be delighted to officiate the ceremony, bless God, and we could use the church for free. My little sister played piano; she could learn the wedding march in a few weeks. I asked my best friend Crystal, who’d just found out she was five

weeks along, to be my maid of honor. No party, no punch, no cake, just a few flowers and maybe a unity candle if I could afford it.

Daddy looked pissed. “Now, where do you get off puttin’ that in the paper? I had to hear about it from the girls up at the office when I stopped to pick up my paycheck. They were all congratulations this and weddin’ that.”

“I’m doin’ the right thing, gettin’ married like I’m supposed to.”

“You said y’all was goin’ up to the courthouse and takin’ care of everything.”

“I just wanna get married in a church. It’s not gonna cost you anything, Daddy.”

“That ain’t the point.” He swatted the bar with the rolled up newspaper. It unfurled on the dark wood where he let it lay, daring me with eyes. For a second, I thought about reaching for it slowly. But I snatched it up, opened straight to the page, and laid it out big as day. I thought picture looked nice, innocent.

“You didn’t even ask me before you done it.”

“I didn’t know I had to ask you before I do every little thing. It’s *my* wedding.”

“You mind your smart mouth, young lady. It’s *my* house, and you’re still *my* daughter.”

“Well, I’m so sorry, I’m such a disgrace. I guess now the whole town knows. I done *shamed* the family name.”

I pushed back my stool and stomped down the hall to my bedroom. Daddy headed out to the garage, where he always went to fix things. I shut myself inside my blue room. Josh had helped me paint it while I was on house arrest last summer—warm spring blue. When it dried, I hung tie-died Grateful Dead tapestries and put glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. It all seemed so juvenile now. I sat cross legged on the black

comforter in the middle of my king-sized waterbed and cried into a stuffed teddy bear until my snot matted the fuzz.

I thought about how Daddy always needed to control everything in my life—holding me hostage until he knew where I was going, who I was going with, and their mother’s maiden names. I hated him for it. In a few weeks, he wouldn’t get to tell me what to do anymore. He didn’t get to stop me. As my husband, Josh would be my legal guardian until I turned 18. He could even check me out of school. I wanted to pack a bag and get in Josh’s pickup and ride until we ran out of road. I wanted to run, but I couldn’t get away from the baby, the situation. My Daddy was ashamed of me.

An hour later, he knocked on my door and came in without a word. He sat on the cushioned side rail of my waterbed, with the same gentle demeanor he always had after he whipped me for doing something bad. Daddy used to scold me and let me alone for a while, and then he would come in and tell me how much he loved me and how I needed to do right from then on.

“I ain’t mad you put that in the paper.”

“Then what did I do?” It seemed like lately, I did everything wrong. Finally, I was doing the right thing, and he still got mad. I just couldn’t win.

Daddy was never much to talk about feelings. “It just hurt me to have to hear about it from other people.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It hadn’t occurred to me, really. This wasn’t all happening to Daddy. It was happening to me. I had put him through enough, what with the juvenile delinquency and all. It was time for me to take responsibility. While other kids my age worried about senior trips and college visits, I knew what I was going to be when I grew

up—a mother. And if I had even a pinch of Southern self-respect left in me, I needed a ring on my finger.

~

Good country people live by a certain code. If a man borrows another man's tractor, he brings it back with a full tank of gas. If he borrows another man's tools, he puts them back just like he found them. And if he gets a man's daughter pregnant, he marries her. That is, if he's a man worth anything. A good man steps up and takes what's coming to him.

I wanted to get married before I started to show; I didn't want the pictures of me as the fat, pregnant bride. Josh gave me the ring from his father's second marriage, so that didn't cost anything. A month earlier, he came over to see me before school, which he had never done before. Daddy usually woke me in the mornings at 6:30. At 6:15, he hadn't even started the coffee pot yet, but he must have let Josh in. I slept curled up in the far corner of my bed as he walked into my room and knelt by my bedside. Josh rubbed my back and called my name. I fit him into my dream, and he sat there a moment while I stirred. When I opened my eyes, his face so close to mine made me smile.

“Good morning.” I stretched. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I just wanted to see you.”

I sat up and hugged his neck, smelled his hair, pressed his chest against mine.

“Will you marry me?” he asked.

“In a heartbeat.” When I pulled back from him, I saw he held an engagement ring. “I thought you were just saying that.”

“I am. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I screamed like my favorite team had just scored a goal. He slipped the ring on my finger. It spun around, loose below my knuckle. In a few months, it would tighten up. It came with a matching band. I guess his dad must have told him it cost of a thousand dollars for the set, because he convinced me of the same thing. I had never worn real jewelry or diamonds, so I just believed him when he told me the thin eighteen karat gold ring with diamond cut sparkles was expensive and fancy. The girls in my homeroom seemed skeptical, but they gave me my moment to tell about the proposal anyway.

With my Christmas money, the wedding budget grew from three hundred to five hundred dollars. I bought Josh’s ring—a yellow gold man ring with a diagonal of diamond chips across the top—for ninety-nine dollars at the local jewelry store. A few days before the wedding, I drove down to Memphis to see my mother and shop for a dress. We found one on the Macy’s clearance rack of leftover winter formal gowns. It was off-white rayon with a glitter shimmer and hung straight to the floor, but not too fitted, with spaghetti straps and a drape neck for my boobs to grow. I talked the sales manager down to fifteen dollars because someone had smeared make-up on the bottom. After a good wash, the stain came right out. I fashioned a veil from a few yards of tulle, a wire hanger, and some pearl beads I found in the WalMart craft section.

On the day of the wedding, I came straight from my hair appointment to the courthouse. I wore jeans and a yellow flannel button down, so I wouldn’t mess up my elegant up do by having to pull a shirt over my head. Sheila worked in my cousin’s hair salon, and she had cut my hair for years. She gave me a perm in sixth grade and a French

twist last homecoming. This time, she pulled my light brown hair back in looping curls and affixed the long veil I had made to flow down my back.

“Best wishes, honey.” Sheila gave me a ten dollar discount. “Consider it a wedding present.”

My hair took longer than I thought, and I didn’t want to be late meeting Josh and Daddy on their lunch breaks. I walked fast, but not too bouncy, up the brick steps to the courthouse. Both men stood in the hallway waiting for me.

In the state of Tennessee, a minor cannot marry without permission from her legal guardian, so Daddy had to sign for the marriage license. We walked up to the wooden counter of the Henry County Clerk’s Office. Of course, my daddy knew the lady doing the paperwork, and they chatted while we all signed on our respective lines. Josh had to hurry back to his job site and meet his crew to nail down a roof on a metal building on the other side of town. They had to finish up if he wanted to get off in time to change into his suit.

“I’ll see you later at the church,” I said. I hugged him goodbye. Daddy and I waited while the lady printed our names in neat letters on the license. She fanned the ink dry for a second and held it up for the taking.

“Thirty-two dollars and fifty cents.” She snapped her gum.

Daddy didn’t reach for his wallet. “You’re on ya’ own now.”

I pulled out my folding money and counted out exact change with the coins rustling around the bottom of my purse. One by one, I placed nickels and dimes on the counter and slid them over.

“Sure is a lot cheaper to get into than it is to get out of, ain’t it Ronnie?” she asked my dad.

“I’ll give you that,” he said.

I took the receipt and hugged Daddy’s neck, careful not to catch my veil in anything. “So I’ll see you at the church at seven?”

“I guess you want me to wear a tie.”

“I want you to wear the whole suit, Daddy.” He only had one that he wore to weddings and funerals. “But don’t worry; you don’t have to keep it on long. The whole service’ll only last ‘bout twenty minutes.”

“I know, but I was hopin’ you might change your mind about the tie.”

“Please, Daddy?” I asked as he held the door open for me.

“I’m just pickin’ at you. I’ll be there at seven. With the tie on.”

~

My grandparents were the only people I knew who married for life. Mom’s parents still lived together in holy matrimony after forty-something years. Grandma Green had wed her first husband (may he rest in peace) at 18, but I don’t know if she was with child or not. I have never asked. People married younger back in the forties, especially in the country where kids worked the farm. Grandma’s first born of two children, my Aunt Sandy, wed her first husband at 17. She married in her first trimester. So on January 2, 1998, as the only girl in the next generation of the Green family, I prolonged the pattern.

I had not done this math the day I got up the courage to tell Grandma I was pregnant. But I was ashamed to tell my Grandma—the good country lady who made me

chicken and dumplin's and peanut butter cookies, who taught me how to sew buttons and whip stitch a hem, who threatened to get the flyswatter after me if didn't stop acting ugly. She and Grandpa Jay used to let me stay in the spare room for a week at spring break, and she would always have little projects for me like planting flowers with my own little spade or sifting flour with the old tin sifter to get the lumps out.

Grandma deserved to hear it from me. I drove down the old tar and chip road, over the hill, around the curve, and turned onto familiar beige gravel. All the cannas Grandpa Jay had planted along the driveway had disappeared for the winter. The corn field had grown over with weeds and sprouts of evergreen.

As soon as I walked in, she offered me something to eat and I commenced to raiding the leftovers. She never could cook for just two people, so she always had homegrown vegetables—green beans, purple hull peas, cream corn. She and Grandpa Jay planted a two-acre garden every year, and I imagine she'll keep her deep freezer full as long as she's able. I pulled four glass bowls from the refrigerator, a clean plate from the cabinets and silverware from the drawer by the sink. Grandma sat at the big open bar in the kitchen. She sat on her oak spindled stool by the telephone and watched me scoop helpings onto my plate. I didn't say much.

“How's school goin'?”

“It's all right. I'm making good grades in all my classes this year.”

“You're gonna have to if you intend to get into college. Them colleges won't take you if you don't make high marks.”

“I know, Grandma.” I covered my plate with a paper towel and put it in the microwave. The silence after I pressed the beeping buttons lasted for a full minute.

Replacing the covers on all the dishes, I tried to put them back on the shelves, but I could never get them to fit just right. Grandma got down and rearranged the milk and a dish of deviled eggs.

“It’s hard to get ‘em back in there sometimes after you pull ‘em out,” she said.

The microwave beeped. I brought my plate to the bar next to her spot and stirred my food around to even the temperature. Grandma sat beside me. We chatted about how Daddy was coming along with his lawnmower he bought off of the man down the road. She asked how I liked taking pizza orders, even though they didn’t deliver all the way out to her house—not that she would ever order a pizza anyway. After a few minutes of silence, me eating and her sitting just content to have company, I put my fork down.

“Grandma, I’m pregnant.”

She didn’t ask how I felt or how far along I was. She didn’t look disappointed, not as far as I could tell. I barely saw past my own reflection in her prescription bifocals, but I don’t even think she blinked.

“Well,” she said. “When’s the weddin’?”

~

I picked out two small bouquets of stargazer lilies and pink roses with baby’s breath—no carnations because I heard someone once say they looked cheap—three single rose boutonnières and a unity candle. They charged extra for the stand and the tapered lighting candles, but I thought I could just use some from home and sit them all on a table beside the pulpit. I wrote a check to the florist for seventy-five dollars. Last year, Daddy had set me up a checking account tied to one of his, so I could have practice learning to be responsible with money. I hardly ever over-drafted, but I knew funds were getting

down to the single digits. On the day of the wedding, I asked mom to pick up the flowers and meet me at the church around six.

I didn't wear shoes. I didn't own any that matched the dress, and shoes cost money. Besides, I thought it only fitting to walk down the aisle barefoot. When I got home from the courthouse with my marriage license, I painted my toenails red and packed my honeymoon bag, folded the outfit I would wear leaving the church, the outfit I would try to fit into later. We would only be gone two days because school started back up and Josh needed to work all he could before the weather turned and construction jobs slowed down.

I sat on the pink Formica vanity in the bathroom and spread out the contents of my make up bag—metallic eye shadows, golden bronzers, glitter lip gloss, kid stuff. I sifted through drawers and chose the most sophisticated products I could find. I made myself up with an Avon matte foundation sample, a layer of pressed powder, a light pink blush, heavy brown eye liner to bring out my baby blues, and several swipes of mascara. My lipstick matched the pink of the roses in my bouquet.

Momma picked me up from Daddy's house after she got the flowers. Holding my dress across my arms, I put it in the trunk with my other bag and we headed off to the church. The car smelled of roses and her Beautiful perfume. Before we even reached the end of the gravel, Momma took my hand, her long, slender fingers shaped like mine.

“You don't have to do this,” she said.

“I know.” But I didn't know. I was seventeen, trying for the first time in a long time to do the respectable thing. I had spread my little legs, but I didn't want to have a

bastard child. It would be so much easier to face people's pity when they saw such a young girl with such a round belly, if I had a ring to prove I wasn't trash.

"Well then, here's your wedding present." She slipped an envelope in my hand.

I tore the top off, reached inside, and pulled out torn pieces of paper. When she picked up the flowers, she had gotten my check from the florist and paid for everything herself.

"You paid for all the flowers?"

"And I got the candle lighting business, too."

"Thanks, Momma," I said.

"I'll be here for you, no matter what happens." We sat there for a minute, but I was too nervous to cry. After the drive across town—it took five minutes, but it seemed to last forever—Mom pulled past the BBQ joint on Depot Street and climbed the hill to the church. Because it was built in 1908, there wasn't a parking lot so she parked on the street. Still in my flannel shirt and jeans, with my hair and my veil and my face all made up, I carried boxes of flowers up the steps to creaking front door. I let Mom set up while I took my bag downstairs to the basement Sunday school classroom. I dressed alone. Then I sat there in full costume and prayed until my best friend Crystal showed up for her maid of honor duties.

I stood on the cold concrete and took her soft hands into mine. "Tell me this is right," I said. "He's a good guy."

"Josh is a great guy." She spoke in a soft voice. "But if you want me to pull the car around right now, I will."

"No." I pictured Josh at the altar, waiting for me. "I'm gonna' marry him."

At seven o'clock, I followed Crystal up the rickety wooden stairs. My Daddy stood in his suit, with a tie and the pink rose on his lapel. He'd trimmed his mustache, and he smiled at me so big I knew I'd made him proud this time. Grandma snapped a picture of us, my arm in his, just before he gave me away. My little sister hit the first notes on the piano.

Daddy said, "I sure do love my baby girl."

I felt the frays of the carpet under my feet as he walked me down the aisle. A dozen people stood before the old wooden pews. All my grandparents smiled, nodded.

Josh stood down front with a look of terrific terror. I had never been so relieved to see him standing there, for being the good man I knew he was, for promising to go through all this with me. Forever. I wondered what he thought at that moment, how some men say their wives on their wedding day are the most beautiful thing they've ever seen. With every step, I didn't think *left, together, right, together*. I thought *this is the right thing, right thing, right thing, right thing*, until I heard the preacher ask who presented this woman.

Daddy said, "Her mother and I do."

Brother Edgar made a light-hearted joke about my little, red toenails peaking out from under my dress. Then he opened his Bible and read the traditional vows. Josh and I exchanged rings, lit the candle, and kissed. It all happened so fast, I barely remember any of it. Later, Josh said the same thing—how his heart raced, like his words formed on their own, how he felt different in a way, but not really.

We never had a reception, just a handful of relatives and friends gathered on the church porch, throwing birdseed as we ran down the steps. His buddies had decorated

the truck with shoe polish on the windows and cans tied to the back. Josh had to open the passenger door for me because the handle was broken. Daddy gave us enough money to pay for the cabin at Lake Barkley Lodge, a state park three miles north, where he and mom had gone on their honeymoon. But we couldn't walk the trails take a dip in the pool like they had. It was January and cold.

Josh and I spent the rest of our wedding money at the grocery store on the way out of town where we bought bacon and eggs, a bag of potatoes, sandwich fixings, two nice sized filets, chocolate cake mix, and icing. Josh also picked up a twelve pack of Budweiser for himself.

When the cashier looked up at him before scanning the beer, I said, "We just got married tonight." I rubbed my left hand over my belly.

Josh didn't even get carded.

BABY SHOWER ETIQUETTE

I created a baby shower invitation for the daily assignment in keyboarding class. I loved the computer lab, because I fit in those chairs. I sat before a massive machine and followed text book guides with pictures that showed me screen by screen how to navigate the latest version of Microsoft Office, with written instructions on where to click. In Word, I experimented with font color and size, inserted clip art, created page borders, and so on. I had to produce a document that incorporated the previous day's lesson.

Josh's family in Missouri had thrown me a shower and the ladies at church had thrown me a shower, where both times I put on a proper smile and made a fuss about every gift and how lovely it was to see everyone. But I wanted a party with girls my own age. Barely familiar with such grown folks' traditions as throwing showers, I knew at least that someone else was supposed to throw the damn thing. But no one at school had offered, and I wasn't getting any less pregnant and these weren't exactly traditional circumstances anyway.

I picked a date from my agenda, a week night that didn't conflict with games or pep rallies or Wednesday night church. In large, bold, curly, rainbow-colored font, I centered "Welcome Baby Burton" at the top. Below, formatted in the rows and columns of a thick-lined royal blue table, I named the date, time, and my address. In the center of the page inserted a three inch plush brown teddy bear with a red bow tie around its fuzzy neck. The whole thing was surrounded in a busy border of baby rattles, and in the footer, I added my name and phone number so people could RSVP to me.

For the only time that year, we got to print in color, being as it was part of our grade, and I “accidentally” printed 11 instead of 1. My teacher just shook her head and marked a plus by my name in her grade book. When the bell rang, I walked the halls, handing out invitations to certain girls as they passed by—slipped it in their hands not saying a word like it was a private party. My friend Katie stood by her locker with a group of popular girls in name brand t-shirts, ones with whom I had been acquainted, shared the homecoming nomination with, but seldom saw outside of school. They had busied themselves with sports practice or drama club while I had gone out looking for trouble. More recently, my after school activities included cooking dinner for my husband, compiling baby supplies, and washing tiny wash cloths in Dreft.

“Hey, y’all,” I reached across my belly and handed Katie my prized folded sheet of copy paper. “I’m havin’ a baby shower at my house next Thursday. I’d just love it if you’d come.”

“For sure.” Katie looked at my invitation and tucked her short dark hair behind her ear. She fit in with that crowd, but she rode the good side of bad like me. “It’ll be so fun. Do you want me to come over early and help? My mom can make a lasagna.”

“Yeah. I’ll make a salad and we can play silly games and hang out just the girls—one last time before graduation.” I brought my hand to my chest like it would be the envy of all senior parties.

“It sounds like fun,” one girl remarked.

I couldn’t tell if she was kidding or not, so I did the proper thing. “You’re invited, too.” I thrust my remaining folded papers to each girl in the circle. “But don’t

tell everybody. I'm only askin' a few people, you know how it is. I don't wanna hurt anybody's feelings."

They all said they could make it, how neat it would be, in voices like little girls invited to a princess dress-up tea party. They doted for a second over how cute the invitation was and how big my belly was, and then they scattered to get to class before the bell rang. In a matter of minutes, I knew tongues would start wagging with "I nevers." My peers would judge me, if they hadn't already, and I figured a baby shower wouldn't put them over the top one way or the other. My life had expanded outside the campus of my high school, not like before to the old trestle for a swim in the creek, not to the Walmart parking lot where I used to hang out on Friday nights. With one foot still hung in adolescence, I knew I couldn't throw the all-out end of the year bash. So instead, I had my own little pregnant party with the highfalutinist girls in town.

~

After school on the day of the baby shower, I went shopping at the record store/tanning place in town to buy prizes for the game winners. My total party budget was twenty dollars. I picked out a pear scented candle with a hidden charm that revealed itself as the wax melted, a glowing yellow sun sticker, a hemp bracelet with clay beads, and a travel bottle of tanning lotion.

When I got home, I set to transforming the upstairs living room into baby central. With a ten foot length of twine, I tied each end to the surround sound speakers hanging on either side of the back wall behind the couch like a clothes line. With wooden clothes pins, I hung five of my favorites from my growing collection of little outfits—whites and greens and yellows because we wanted the sex of the baby to be a surprise. Tacked to the

mantel above the fireplace, I hung a banner—also created in keyboarding class—announcing “Welcome Baby Burton!”

I cleared off the mail and magazines usually cluttering the bar and laid out a yellow table cloth I found in the china cabinet. It had jagged wrinkles all over.

The doorbell rang, and I rushed to help Katie. In her loose floral top and jeans, she stood on the porch, balancing two casserole dishes, her hands covered in blue oven mitts.

“Hey, girl. I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Aww, I love what you did with the room.” She followed me to the bar and set down the pans. “This one’s meat, and this one’s vegetarian. They’re both really good. My mom makes the best lasagna.” Before she even took off her oven mitts, she hugged my neck. We were about the same height, but she had to lean in to reach over the baby. “This is gonna be so fun.”

“That smells so yummy. Oh my gosh, tell your mom I said thanks.” The warm garlic aroma hovered around me. “I might need to taste test.”

“You should. It’s your party.” She winked one brown eye at me and turned around. “I’ve got the stuff for the punch in my car.”

“I borrowed a nice set from my grandma’. I’ll set it all out.”

With a black plastic soup ladle—I had forgotten to get the nice one that matched the sparkling crystal bowl and cups—we mixed ginger ale and sherbet and orange juice. I added a frozen quart of strawberries from the freezer, just to keep it all cold. Then, I looked up at the liquor cabinet.

“What’re you thinkin’?” Katie’s voice drew in a rising tone. She cracked a smile.

“I’m not gonna have any. I made a pitcher of sweet tea, but we could livin’ up the punch a little.” I wondered what my guests would do with just a taste of the wild side.

“Would you drink some?”

“Yeah,” she answered like I didn’t even have to ask. Katie tucked her hair behind her ear again. She looked all natural and earthy. “Will your dad get mad?”

“He’s not coming home until nine. I told him we’d just bother him with our cackling. And having my daddy at my baby shower would be so embarrassing.”

“Okay, then.” She surveyed the variety of bottles and asked, “Which one goes with punch?”

I walked over to the liquor cabinet mounted to the wall. It was solid light oak with glass doors, one Daddy had salvaged from a science lab in a plant across town.

Lined up on the shelves were bottles, some I knew and some I didn’t.

“Not the whiskey.” Jack Daniel’s green label. That was Daddy’s drink; he called it Coke plus. He had a couple every evening after work, but I can’t ever recall seeing him drunk. And he knew exactly how much was in that bottle. “Years ago, Daddy said he caught one of his younger cousins sneakin’ in, stealin’ booze and cigarettes. He counted the packs and put tiny notches on the green label to mark the level of his Jack, and he was losing both every day. One afternoon, he drove his truck to the next road over and came up through the back woods. He sat and waited until he caught my cousin climbing through the window, said if he ever saw him on his property again, by God, he’d better be able to outrun a bullet.”

“Then maybe we shouldn’t.”

I started pulling bottles off the shelves. “Let’s just add a little bit from each one. Then he’ll never know.”

Katie and I took turns splashing in vodka and tequila and schnapps and some kind of bourbon in a fancy bottle. I stirred with the plastic ladle and poured Katie a cup. Strawberries had melted off the ice block and floated along the top of the concoction.

“How is it?”

“I can’t really taste anything.”

So we took turns doing it again. On the second taste, Katie pronounced it strong enough.

I covered the yellow tablecloth with a half dozen crystal punch glasses and salad bowls and serving utensils and strong paper plates with matching napkins I picked up at the Dollar store. They had big teddy bears with red bow-ties like the invitation. Plastic forks never held up right through salad and lasagna, so I picked ten of the nicest mismatched forks from Daddy’s silverware drawer and spread them like a fan. I poured cashews in blue glass mixing bowl. I used the nice tea pitcher and set a sleeve of blue solo cups next to it, with a permanent marker so the nice Church of Christ girls could write their names on them. I wrote my name and poured a cup and took a step back to look at me spread. When I was done, you could barely see the wrinkles underneath.

My guests arrived on time, each bearing a gift bag with a card and tufts of colorful tissue paper. Most of them had on what they’d worn to school, but I had changed into one of the few remaining maternity outfits I could still fit into that didn’t have stains across the front –a white cotton jumper with blue and pink daisies. I greeted

them all with side hugs, and everybody got a clothes pin when they walked through the door. I opted for games involving things around the house.

“If you say the word baby, you lose your clothes pin and your chance at one of the lovely prizes from DJ’s music.” I swept my hand toward the bar and said, “Come on in.”

Katie explained about the punch plus, and a handful of girls sipped from the crystal glasses, holding their pinkies out at first. We feasted on garden salad with all the fixin’s and homemade lasagna and crescent rolls. I, of course, wound up with a tomato sauce stain on my outfit. After the meal, a few of them kept drinking and got tipsy enough to giggle constantly, which made everyone else laugh.

They chatted about finals and papers and senioritis, but all they spoke to me about was baby this and baby that. As the party progressed, I collected clothes pins left and right, lining them along the sleeves of my jumper.

“Everybody find a seat. It’s time for more games.” I stood in the center of the living room and held up a roll of toilet paper. “I want you to tear off a piece you think will fit around my waist, at the belly button.” I handed the roll to Katie.

She tried to be nice, unrolling only a foot or so.

“Keep goin’, honey. You won’t hurt my feelin’s.” I did a model sashay across the room, added some three-quarter turns and poses. “I know I’m big. There’s a whole ‘nother person in this body.”

“A sweet baby,” one girl said. Ooh’s erupted as I walked over and took her clothes pin. When each girl had pulled a piece of toilet paper, I tried them on, delicately so as not to tear them. Kim, a bouncy cheerleader, won the hemp bracelet.

Next, I passed out pens and slips of paper; they had to guess my weight. Since my last doctor visit, I had gained twenty-five pounds, mostly in the front and lagged it around with an aching back. I collected their answers in a small woven basket and brought the scales from Daddy's bathroom. The answer was 135. I watched in their eyes as they compared mine to their own, the way girls do. The winner got the tanning lotion.

"The next prize goes to the person who can make as many words as you can with the letters in "Welcome Baby Burton." I pointed to the banner on the mantle. "You have two minutes. Ready. Set. Go." Kathryn, the senior class president, made eight words. She won the yellow sun sticker.

"Who all has a clothes pin left?" I asked. Only two. "Well, I guess just talk amongst yourselves until someone wins. I'll clean up so Daddy won't come home to a mess." I gathered loose toilet paper and put it in the trash.

"So where do y'all live?" Kathryn asked.

"We have an apartment."

"Oh really, where?"

"Downstairs. We live in the basement—that was the deal for Daddy to sign permission on the marriage license. I have to stay here at least until I graduate high school."

"Can we see it?"

"You want to?" I hadn't considered their interest in my space, the appeal of my autonomy of sorts. "Sure. Follow me."

For the past four months, my husband and I lived in the same space my parents had lived in when they first got married. Momma and Daddy had built the house together

in 1975, from the ground up, dug into the side of a hill outside the city limits on the Green family land. It had two stories, but only one you could see from the road. The basement was half underground.

Daddy and other men in my family had framed and roofed and nailed wooden siding and painted it white. By the time they got to finish the inside, Momma found out she was pregnant with my older brother. For cost's sake, they decided to work on the downstairs and leave the top floor for later, so the gravel driveway led around the house to the back door. We took the stairs.

"This is the kitchen." My guests filed into the room after me like I was a tour guide at some ole Antebellum mansion. "Momma picked out all the décor." I waited while they took in thee busy, yellow flower linoleum and the orange floral wallpaper. An old white natural gas monster of a stove headed the room, since Daddy worked for Paris Natural Gas. "They used to have an avocado green dishwasher on wheels that hooked up to the sink faucet, but Daddy took out a cabinet and put in a real one. It was our Christmas present. Momma said it wasn't fair because she had asked for one every year they were married.

"How old were you when they got divorced?" Katie asked.

"Two." I flashed a peace sign. "I don't ever remember them together, but it's cool. Momma took us kids to Martin and finished college. She got a business degree and wound up in Memphis. Daddy stayed here. They've both been remarried and divorced again, but always stayed friends with each other. I've always had two bedrooms."

I led them down the hall, and they gave, “How sweet’s,” at the family photos. They pointed at one of me as a pudgy toddler in a red dress, the lit profile of my smiling face shining against a black backdrop. That little girl had so much promise.

The bathroom—a small space with a baby blue toilet, bathtub, and marble vanity—had wood paneling stained the color of robin eggs. “Josh uses this bathroom. I still use the pink one upstairs. It’s nicer, and I didn’t see any sense in moving all my products. I keep my clothes in my old bedroom upstairs, too. Closet space.”

We didn’t go into Momma and Daddy’s old room. My brother lived in there, mostly just slept and left, not much on talking. It reminded me of a dungeon with only a two foot window that peeked out at ground level on the lawn beside the house.

“And this is our room.” The other bedroom with a bigger window looked exactly the same as when I was twelve. Two walls were white cinder block, two the same brown wood paneling. The year I lived with Daddy in sixth grade, he put in mauve carpet for me. I had a full size bed with a mauve and blue plaid comforter strewn with floral throw pillows Grandma made with extra material of the same colors. “The laundry room’s off to the side, so that means there’s no lock on the bedroom door. But Daddy always knocks.”

“Aw. Look at this,” Katie used her high baby voice.

In the corner sat a white ruffled bassinet borrowed from a family friend. Grandma and Aunt Sandy bought us a spindled changing table and made pastel washable covers for the vinyl pad on top.

“This is the cabinet from the kitchen where Daddy installed the dishwasher. My grandpa put a top on it.” I walked over to throne baby lotions and powders. I opened the

door and pulled out folded onesies and baby socks for my guests to dote over, which they did.

We moved to the living room. It received no natural light, but fluorescent bulbs lit it up and hummed in the silence. The dark brick hearth and fireplace ran the length of one wall. The others were covered in brown wood paneling. The carpet was brown, too.

“Wow. Your mom liked brown.”

“It used to be calico shag carpet spotted in yellows and oranges and reds. Hideous. A few years ago, the basement flooded and Daddy replaced all the shag with what’s here now. He got a good deal on it.”

“Oh my gosh, I love your furniture. This is exactly what I want in my house when I get one.” Kim the cheerleader walked over and sprawled out on my couch.

With my Dollars for A’s savings account, I had used the two hundred and thirteen dollars to buy used living room furniture—a black leather sofa (later learned to be pleather), modern glass top coffee and end tables, and an oak entertainment center to hold the television and VCR we got from my grandparents for Christmas.

“And look up at the ceiling.” It was sprayed like white popcorn. “Momma mixed in a bit of silver glitter in the hopper so it would look like stars.”

“I like your place,” said Kathryn. “Why didn’t you have the shower down here.”

“I don’t know. It’s nicer upstairs, newer, more places to sit.” I didn’t want them to dwell on the fact I was trying to impress them.

“We can sit down here,” Katie said, and the crowd moved in. “Here, you take the couch.”

“I’d rather lay on the floor, get some of this weight off my back.” I laid on my side with my head propped on my elbow. “So what are y’all doing after graduation?”

“I’m pledging AO Pi at Martin. My mother was AO Pi at Martin.”

“Oh, I’m pledging AO Pi at Knoxville. I have to go there. My family bleeds orange.”

“I’m going to Knoxville, too.”

Other girls started side conversations about the best dorm halls and sharing bathrooms and having suitemates and a thousand girl friends like themselves. I envied them. They would get the college experience I would never have. All this time, I had been trying to be one of them, but my taste for too much of the wild side always separated us. I looked at the girls with the sweet tea cups, their perfect posture and hair just so. They talked about majoring in this and minoring in that. I listened quietly and made swirls with my fingertips in the brown carpet.

“Candice, are you gonna take classes at the Votech?” Kathryn asked.

“No. I’ll probably go to night school at Murray State when the baby gets old enough. I don’t know what I’ll major in. Right now I’m majoring in ‘mom’.”

“But it’s good you still wanna go. College is gonna be so great.”

“Well, y’all have all the fun you want, but I’m gonna get all after-school special on you for a minute.” I sat up and looked around until I caught the attention of the all shining faces in the room. “Whatever you do, use a condom. Everytime. No matter how much you like him or how long you’ve been dating. You think it can’t happen to you, but it can.” I pointed at myself like I was one of them.

I heard only the hum of the fluorescent bulbs until one girl spoke.

“Yeah, ‘cause this is like real.” She had a serious look on her face and one of the remaining clothes pins. “You’re like really gonna have a baby.”

Laughter ensued as she blushed and plucked it from her top and clipped it to my sleeve.

“Let’s go open presents,” I said. “Who’s gonna help me up off this floor?”

After I waddled back up the stairs and gave the scented candle to the winner of the last game, I found a seat in Daddy’s recliner. I opened the gift bags one at a time. I pulled out animal faced hooded towels and tiny Nike shoes and cute outfits with funny sayings I can’t recall—the kinds of things teenagers would buy for a baby –making a fuss and passing them all around for ooh’s and ah’s. Everyone’s voices went an octave or two higher with each one. Katie made a list of who gave what and I tied the pretties purple bow in my hair.

When it was over, my guests smiled and thanked me for having them. Everyone was alright to drive by then. I poured the remaining punch far out in the back woods and cleaned out the whole set before Daddy got home. He never found out about the liquor, or maybe just never said anything about it.

The next day at school, I delivered thank you notes, not mass produced in keyboarding class, but hand written ones on teddy bear note cards with a personal thought on each individual gift. I returned Katie’s mom’s casserole dishes spotless with a note for her, too. And I didn’t do it because I was just putting on, trying to practice proper etiquette. Those girls had given me gifts, tokens of proof for the very thing that separated us. And when somebody gives you something, whether you like it or not, you thank them. It’s just plain manners.

MATERNITY PROM DRESS

I rented my prom dress from the same store in Memphis where a year earlier I had found my evening gown for the World's Biggest Fish Fry Hostess Princess pageant in 1997. I lived in Paris, Tennessee, a map dot town about two hours north of the city, where every year on the last Friday in April, the town shut down and school let out for a parade down Wood Street. People who lived off the back roads along the outskirts would get there the night before and park their pick-ups and flat-bed trailers alongside the road. Others came in the morning and set up lawn chairs and coolers on the side walk; they spread blankets on raised grass embankments.

Little kids scurried around with sticky fingers, catching and eating candy thrown from the floats of scout troops and the Moose Lodge. The Fish Fry Queen and her court dangled, ankles crossed, from dainty swings hanging from crepe paper palm trees. They wore Hawaiian sundresses and sashes, and they waved back and forth, shaping the bottom of an imaginary clay bowl with their hands. Shriners in fezzes zoomed around on go-karts in figure-eights. Congressmen waved from red convertibles. Every block or so, the fire truck would blare the siren. Bands from other towns around the state marched in full uniform. Flags from the color guard twirled to beats pounded out by the drum line. Then the horses came. It always ended with the horses because they left droppings.

When the parade was over, everybody scattered down to the carnival at the fairgrounds where the catfish races were held. In twenty-foot watering troughs set side by side, businesses paid twenty-five dollars to sponsor and name a catfish something like "Splash Gordon" or "River Racer." They'd plop each fish in a trough and run them five

at a time like a swim competition. The winner of the finals got a trophy and bragging rights and his picture in the paper. But more than anything else, Fish Fry was about seeing folks. Everybody knew everybody else, and half the town was related by blood or by marriage.

But I wasn't worried about seeing folks at Fish Fry in 1998. I was a senior in high school. I worried instead about finding a dress for prom. Not a place for miles rented maternity formal wear. I didn't see the point in buying a dress when I only had a couple of months to go. So I missed all the festivities and drove down from Paris to the dress shop alone.

"I need to rent a formal gown," I said to the salesgirl behind the counter.

She looked from my face down to my belly, and I could tell she wanted to ask how old I was. People asked me all the time. A woman would have been offended, but I was still young enough for it to be okay. I had always looked younger than my actual age. When my class used to line up for picture day in elementary school, shortest to tallest, I was always the first one, holding the sign of the teacher's name. I smiled with my apple cheeks and baby face and round blue eyes. I had a petite, slim frame, and I bloomed later than most other girls. At fifteen I could still pass for a child at the movie theater for a cheaper ticket. But at seventeen, as I grew rounder, people asked my age for a different reason.

"What event are you going to?" the lady asked, eyeing my wedding ring.

"I'm seventeen, and I'm looking for a prom dress." I just put it all out for her.

"Well, bless your little heart." That means pity in Southern speak.

"Thanks," I said.

“We don’t have much of a selection for that, but I bet we can find you something.” She came around the counter and set to work looking through round racks of sparkling inventory. She found three options. “You start with these, and I’ll look over here in the plus sizes to see if anything’ll work.”

It took me ten minutes in the tiny dressing room to get out of my clothes and half-way into the first dress—a black sequined cocktail number snug and short enough for a pregnant slut. It had looked different on the hanger. “Help,” I yelled, tugging the scratchy material over my stretched belly. “I can’t pull it up.”

“Do you need assistance, dear?” The sales lady knocked on the door.

“Is there anyone else here?”

“You’re our only customer right now.”

“Well, come on in. I’m not shy.”

She left the door open and joined me—granny panties and all—in the dressing room. I pulled and wiggled until the dress covered just about everything it was going to cover. My navel had begun to poke out like the button in a turkey timer when it’s ready to be taken out of the oven. Black material covered it, and a lone sequin dangled like a tiny drum cymbal off the front. The salesgirl zipped me up in the back and told me I looked nice when we stepped out to the triple mirror. That was her job, I guess.

“I think I’m too far along for this one,” I said.

“I agree. When are you due?” She unzipped me.

“June.” I exhaled a deep breath. “But prom is next week.” I held the front of the dress to my chest and scooted back into the dressing room. After I peeled the damn thing

off, she handed me a white draping lace thing that looked more like a table cloth than a gown. I put my head through a hole in the middle and searched for the sleeves.

“This doesn’t really say *prom*.” I tried to find my way out of the tent.

“No, not really.” She turned her head and paused. “We have one more, but it’s red. I don’t know if you want to go that bold.” She was trying to be nice.

“At this point, what do I have to hide?”

It wasn’t a muted maroon or a tasteful burgundy; the gown was blazing scarlet. And I loved it. The soft silk cooled me in elegance. It hung to the floor from my shoulders by satin ribbon straps two fingers wide. The empire waist held my full chest. My breasts had grown from an A cup to a C, and for the first time in my life, I had a cleavage line. But the scoop neck covered it properly. Who wanted to see a pregnant girl’s cleavage anyway? Where was the mystery in that?

I was a sure thing on prom night—for my husband. But we didn’t. We had stopped that business a month after the wedding back over Christmas break. Josh didn’t want to hurt the baby. He didn’t like dances either, being as he was already two years out of school and working for the paving company in town. But I had begged him to take me.

“Get one of your friends to take you, like back at homecoming.”

“Well things are a little different now, don’t you think?” I laid my right hand on my shelf of a tummy and pressed the other to his cheek so he could feel my wedding band. “Nobody, not even a really good friend, wants to take someone else’s pregnant wife to prom.”

So he said yes, and I rented my dress and him a tux with tails. As a self-respecting country boy, he refused to wear a tie. At the men's shop on the court square, I found onyx button covers and a red vest to match my ensemble.

The silk of my dress hugged my round belly, but a front panel, an extra layer, hung from the empire waist to the floor, softening the pronounced curve. Another panel in back helped conceal my ever-growing behind. I never had one of those before either, and proof spread in pink claw-like scars across my skin, no matter how much cocoa butter I slathered on.

But tonight I looked beautiful.

My light brown hair—thick and long from months of prenatal vitamins and extra estrogen—swept high into an up-do of mounding curls at my crown. Simple rhinestone earrings and soft blue eyes left play for my bright red lips, lined and glossed with perfect arches at the top. Instead of a necklace, an arm's length red satin scarf draped gently around my neck and hung to either side, a token of class.

I refused to miss my own prom just because I was pregnant. My baby was not a disease that kept me invalid. My “condition” wasn't contagious. I had watched television shows where girls had never gone to prom because of some boy, and then they regretted it for the rest of their lives. I didn't have a terrible date ditch me for another girl. I had a husband who bought me a red rose corsage and slipped it on my hand. He loved me and I loved him, and we were going to be a family soon. But I wasn't going to miss senior prom. I had more important things to worry about than other people's opinions. So I put on my red dress and painted red lips. By God, I was going, baby and all.

I didn't get ready with a bunch of girlfriends waiting for our dates to pick us up in a limo. Josh and I dressed in our bedroom at home.

Daddy charged us fifty dollars a month in rent, due on the first. He had gotten Josh a good job with the pavement contractor in town, nine dollars an hour starting out, with benefits after ninety days. I worked at Papa John's pizza for minimum wage. After school and on weekends, I wore my uniform, a red polo shirt and khakis, including the logo ball cap. I took orders, cashiered, made pizzas, and ate tons of Peppercinni peppers.

"Thank you for choosing Papa John's Pizza. May I have your phone number please?" That's how we looked up customer information to place an order. I bet I said it a million times, and it always felt weird asking people for their phone number. When they walked in to pick up to-go orders, nobody could see I was pregnant behind the register, until I turned sideways to grab the box off the warming shelf. The red apron stretched across my belly, and a line of flour gathered across it like an equator where the counter stopped at the dough station. When making change, I always made sure people could see my wedding ring. I was doing things proper. At least I wasn't having a bastard child. Sometimes, they left me a dollar tip.

Josh and I paid for our own phone, insurance, and groceries. We had our own life together in the basement. But if we ever needed anything, Daddy was right upstairs. He gave us our privacy, and advice, often more than we cared to hear. Sometimes when I cooked supper in the evenings with the vegetables from Grandma's garden, we would invite Daddy down to eat with us at our kitchen table.

But on prom night, the tradition was to go out and eat a nice supper before the dance. My friend Katie dated a boy named Jay, who was also two years out of school, so

we all rode down to Jackson to the Red Lobster to have a fancy meal. When Josh and I returned home to get ready, I found my way into my dress and applied my make up with precision. He had to help me with the buckles on my strappy red heels because I couldn't bend over far enough to reach my feet. Daddy called us upstairs to take the traditional picture in front of the fireplace.

“You're awfully bright there, ain't 'cha?”

“Don't you think I look nice, Daddy?”

“I sure do, but you could've toned it down a bit.” Daddy looked me up and down, and then he searched Josh's face for some kind of agreement.

“Hell, Ronnie, you know as well as I do, you can't tell her □arling'.”

“So y'all hate my dress.” I folded my arms across my chest and rested them on my belly. I almost started to cry, but the tears would mess up my mascara. I cried over everything in those days, hormones going all crazy. For a minute, I thought about pitching a little hissy fit— slinging off my scarf and staying home. If my own husband thought I wasn't suitable to show up at the dance, maybe I should forget the whole thing. But there's nothing more pitiful than a sniffling, pregnant teenager all decked out for prom.

“No, □arling',” Daddy said. “You look pretty.”

He kissed me on the cheek and told Josh to watch after me. Most fathers would lecture the boy who was about to take their only daughter out for the last dance of high school, warning about repercussions for inappropriate behavior. But at this point, what did Daddy have to worry about?

“Now y'all don't be out too late on the road with all them drunks.”

“I’ll take real good care of her,” Josh said. He opened the door for me proper.

We met Katie and Jay in the high school parking lot. The boys swigged from a flask as I admired Katie’s sleek black dress under the street lights. She wore her thick dark hair in a chin-length bob, and she had welcoming brown eyes— one of those girls who are naturally beautiful.

“Oh my gosh, Candice. Where did you get that dress?”

“At a boutique in Memphis,” I said, ready to defend myself.

“It’s so great. You look like a pretty little mommy.” She reached out and touched my belly. My friends always did that. Sometimes strangers did and it pissed me off.

“You like it?” I twirled around.

“I love it,” Katie said. “Come on, you guys. Let’s go in. Mr. Henderson is standing at the door.”

I pulled mints out of my dainty beaded purse. “Here. Eat some of these.”

The boys got out and buttoned their jackets and escorted us to the front entrance. The vice principal nodded as we walked up. Mr. Henderson was a massive man, a former line backer with a bum knee. I had squirmed in the chair outside his office waiting for punishment more times than I could count, but since I found out I was pregnant, I had turned all business. No more skipping school or roaming the halls or smoking after lunch with the boys out by the woodshop. I came to school everyday with my work done, and I never asked for any special treatment, accept for extra bathroom breaks. I didn’t need a reason to get kicked out of school. I had to graduate. I was going to be a mother.

But if he tried to stop me from walking into my own prom, big ole Mr. Henderson would have to get on his little walkie-talkie and call in reinforcements. What was he gonna do? Lay a hand on me and Josh would beat the crap out of him. I pictured the faculty joining arms like in red-rover trying to keep me out, standing as one to protect the good kids from the promiscuous girl. I knew my rights. Since a law passed back in 1972 letting girls play sports, public schools had to let every student participate in all functions regardless of pregnancy. If he didn't let me in, I would hit Mr. Henderson where it really hurt. I would sue his ass.

“Good evening, folks.” He stood tall with his hands in his pockets.

“Hello, sir,” Josh nodded and smiled and held the door for me.

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Unlike generations before when girls who had gotten “in trouble” were shunned, Paris in the late 1990's didn't expel pregnant girls. No one moved them to convents or special schools to deliver babies in shame. There were seven of us at Henry County High School. Every other week, while other students attended chess club or math club or Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings, we had BABES class. It was an acronym for something I don't remember. Funded with federal money, it was a program to help teen mothers get make it to get their diplomas, one step closer to keeping them off welfare.

We met in the journalism classroom because it had tables and chairs instead of the hard plastic desks that I could barely fit into anymore. Some days, it was like study hall with a spread of pastries and juice. Different female teachers talked to us about diet and prenatal care. A lady from the Health Department came and told us how to sign up for the WIC, a federal program that gives vouchers for free food. In one class, we learned to

diaper, dress, and swaddle plastic baby dolls. Mostly, we talked among ourselves about our changing bodies and types of bottles and nursery colors and whether we were going to nurse or not.

Three of us had gotten married. Two planned to wed after their babies came. But I was the only senior left who had not dropped out or switched to the Vocational School for GED classes. And as far as I know, I was the only pregnant, married girl at prom in the Henry County Patriots graduating class of 1998. Go big red!

When I stepped in, the roar of gabbing teenagers hit us full on. Young ladies in their sparkling best and guys in black and white stood together in the cafeteria, waiting in line for the photographer. A group of girls from my baby shower called Katie over to get in their picture. I hung back, not wanting to spoil their memories, but they called me over to join them. Josh and Jay hung back by the cinderblock wall, probably talking about anything but prom.

Most of the girls in the photo wore black dresses, like they had planned it or something. A few went for a deep color like purple and navy, but none as bold as mine. I spun around to show the back, careful not to lose my footing and fall.

“From behind, you can’t even tell you’re pregnant,” Katie said.

Then I turned around. There was my baby, full on. “It’s kicking,” I said. I never found out the sex of the baby at ultrasounds. We had wanted to keep it a surprise.

“Oh, let me feel.” One girl reached her arm forward. I placed her hand on the curve below my satin scarf. When the baby moved, she jerked her hand back. “Oh my gosh, that is so cool.”

We all giggled as the photographer called our group next. He lined up all eight of us, four on each side, turned toward the center. I stood on the far left, the scarlet end in the line of dark dresses. We all stood up straight and opened our eyes and smiled in this moment we would remember forever. Flash.

The gym had been decorated with crepe paper streamers and balloons and a faux Eiffel tower entwined with white Christmas lights. I had never really danced at school dances before. I had always just shown up long enough to see what everyone wore, take pictures with groups of friends, and head to the after party at whomever's house so I could get fucked up enough to slightly sober before curfew. But this was prom. Henry County High School maintained a tradition of presenting each attendee properly in a parade fashion.

Josh took my arm and we got in line at the bottom of the stairs with my other friends and their dates. After waiting our turn to ascend the concrete staircase leading to the balcony bleachers surrounding the basketball court, we were prompted by my marketing teacher to print our names on a sheet of paper and keep our places in line. I watched as the procession of seniors in my class lined the balcony, stepping in time, advancing forward with each couple announced as they passed under a balloon arch on the other side. They descended to the dance floor to watch other couples.

“Mr. Chad Baldwin and Miss Lindsey Winsette.”

“Mr. Scott Reed and Miss Samantha Morgan.”

It took me a second to think about how it should read. Even I knew the proper way to introduce a married couple involved only the man's full name. But I was the student here. Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Burton? Mr. Joshua and Mrs. Candice Burton? Mr.

Joshua Burton and Mrs. Candice Burton? That sounded like brother and sister. I scribbled both of our first and last names, leaving the choice up to the announcer. I wondered if they had ever dealt with this sort of thing before.

So as not to upset the impatient line growing behind us, I handed the slip of paper to my teacher who glanced down and nodded with the all too familiar smile of pity to which I had grown accustomed, or oblivious, whichever one suited my mood. As my baby grew bigger inside me, those looks came so often I learned to block them out. Those people had no idea what I was going through, but I felt their ache of knowing how hard my life would be.

I gathered up inches of silk, and we climbed the stairs. Josh steadied me, as I was twenty pounds front heavy and wearing heels, until we reached the top. I had never been in this part of the gym before. I had never even attended a basketball game, despite the alibis I had told my father on a few occasions. But, now here I stood, in line with my classmates. Even the grubbiest rednecks who wore camouflage to school because they had been up deer hunting since dawn, looked clean and fancy and stately.

I loosened the scarf around my neck, pulled so tight from my fidgeting that I thought I would choke. My nerves triggered the baby to kicking little blows to my ribs.

“Mr. Jay Atkins and Miss Kathryn Flowers Kendall.” The couple before us stepped under the arch.

I had always been one to crave attention. Everything I did screamed, “Look at me!” But here in my red maternity formal gown, on the arm of my husband, it was never the way I had pictured myself at prom. This was not the moment I had craved, not the kind of popularity girls struggle for in high school.

Everyone stared up at us, at me. I felt the whispers, the asides from the dance floor. I wanted to believe they were saying how beautiful I looked or how my hair lie in perfect place, but I knew they were making snide remarks. The new Fish Fry Queen leaned over to a cheerleader friend of mine and whispered something behind her hand. How tacky for me to even show up, much less in red. A couple of the guys on the soccer team, one I had dated before Josh, nudged the other with his elbow.

Through the crowd of couples in their finest and the Class of '98 confetti and the twisted red, white, and blue streamers—they watched me. They all turned their eyes up and watched me. I straightened my spine like I had practiced in modeling class—shoulders up, back, and down— but there was no tightening my abdomen muscles to make the pooch disappear.

“Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Burton.” Our baby led Josh and I under the balloon arch, arm in corsaged arm, and we descended the stairs, smiling. I thanked God for my husband there to make sure I didn't fall.

I stood out alright, just not in the prom queen fashion I had always anticipated when I was a freshman dreaming about my last school dance. No, I was the pregnant girl at prom. After the procession, the DJ played a Will Smith song, and I rushed to the dance floor with a gaggle of girls. My strappy heels hid under my dress, squeezing in swollen ankles, but I danced anyway. My moves were different. No more sensuous swaying, I bounced my baby weight from one leg to the other in rhythm with the beat.

My husband came out for one slow song. He placed his hands where my waist had been months before. My hands rested on his shoulders. The ribbon of my wrist

corsage tickled his ear, and he smiled. We rocked back and forth, from side to side, inching around and around in a slow circle but never going anywhere.

“Thank you for bein’ my prom date, Mr. Burton,” I said.

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Burton.” Josh leaned down and in toward me, pressing against my belly. He never was one for public displays of affection, but he kissed me in front of everyone right there on the dance floor. I knew he didn’t want to be there, but he had come for me, to make me happy, and that was love.

After the dance, we headed to Jay’s house where Josh drank for a while. I had sweet iced tea in a solo cup and loaded all my weight into a comfy, brown recliner. Josh told some of his older buddies about going seeing Mr. Henderson, the old bastard. I watched television on mute and listened to a guy in the kitchen play Nirvana songs on acoustic guitar. Drunk people hollered out every now and then.

“Are you okay?” Katie asked.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just pregnant and tired.”

When Josh got ready to go, I drove us home just before midnight. My feet hurt, and he wanted to go fishing in the morning. As we pulled slowly down the long driveway around to the back door, I saw through the upstairs living room window. The lamp was on and the television showed some Western.

He’d never admit it, but my daddy was waiting up.

COMMENCEMENT DELIVERY

I never asked for special treatment, other than extra bathroom breaks. Missing less than eight days of the school year, including doctor's appointments, I buried myself in my studies and completed all the extra credit I could talk my teachers into, or out of. My grade point average reflected my partying days, and time for improvement dripped away faster than I thought. I needed at least a 3.0 to get into a decent college—maybe not next year, but sometime.

During American History final review, I raised my hand.

“Coach Harrison, can I please stand up in the back of the class?”

“Go ahead.” Coach barely acknowledged me.

Normally teenagers would worry about their peers watching them, eyes following them to the back of the room while everyone else sat still, but I needed to concentrate, and the baby wouldn't move. My belly had grown so large I could only fit sideways in the hard plastic school desks. The baby squirmed after my cafeteria meal, having to share space beneath my bones. A foot or an elbow or a fist was lodged in between my ribs. Unable to concentrate through the dull pain, I poked and pressed on the lumps, missing half the time line of the Civil War.

With my pen and my spiral notebook, I waddled behind the back row to the cinder block wall and leaned against the cool glossy white paint. I stretched my spine, the baby shifted, and I propped my notebook on my shelf of a belly to continue the outline of the Civil War. By the time we covered the Emancipation Proclamation, the baby had gotten the hiccups and my notes turned into illegible scribbles.

Instead of my maiden name, on assignments I wrote “Mrs. Candice Burton” in the top right hand corner of my paper—not like some dreamy-eyed teenager with thoughts of living someday in a little white house and picket fence with her high school sweetheart and a yard full of kids. I wrote it for real. Under my name I wrote the date, class period, and something like Chapter 13 Vocabulary Quiz. I don’t know that I learned anything in those last two months, spending hours and hours memorizing information long enough to regurgitate it later on multiple choice tests. Maybe I couldn’t avoid the fact that I was a pregnant teenager, but at least I could distract myself a little longer with something productive like earning a diploma.

But I didn’t want “Candice Renee Burton” printed in squire font on the heavy parchment paper. I wanted to walk the line as Burton—everyone in town came to the football field on graduation night, and if I had to cross that stage nine months pregnant, at least I *had* a married name walk under. But I wanted my maiden name to appear on my diploma—the culmination of my own trials and studies over the last four years. I had only been Candice Burton for a few months.

When I introduced myself, someone always asked, “Hey, like Candice Bergen?”

“Wow, I’ve never heard that before.”

“Where you named after her? Are you old enough to know who she is?”

Momma did name me after the actress long before she appeared in Murphy Brown as the star in her sitcom, the first voluntary unwed mother on prime-time network television.

“Back in the eighties, my momma saw Candice in a fragrance commercial. She rode a white horse along this sandy beach, trails of white satin blowing in the wind

behind her. Momma thought she looked so beautiful, she named me Candice Renee Green.”

Strangers looked at my young face atop my round body, and then at my left ring finger, and figured everything out. At least my new name rhymed with one of an accomplished actress and not something else like Brittany Pierce. A similar name was the closest I ever came to anyone famous. But I didn’t want it on my diploma.

Josh didn’t take any offense to my request. He acted like a man who would become a father any day now. His favorite phrase: whatever you want.

For some reason, I tended to get a bit moody in those last days of pregnancy.

~

Henry County High School Patriot colors were naturally red, white, and blue. I had ordered my radish polyester cap and gown in extra-small at the beginning of the school year. On graduation day, I picked up my plastic bag from my Josten’s representative. I opened it up and found my mortar board, a gold tassel for honors, and a gown that refused to cover the front hem of my green plaid dress. I knew because I tried it on right there in the cafeteria.

“Do you have a large?” I asked the thin brunette in her pencil skirt.

“Is that not what you ordered?” She looked confused amidst her letter-labeled boxes.

“I was a size zero back in August.” I pointed to my belly, explaining the obvious.

“Well, let me check. What’s your name?”

“Candice Burton.”

“Oh, like Candice Bergen. I just love her.” She flipped through a list.

“Try Candice Green.”

“Yes, here you are. Extra-small.” Her turned voice to pity. “I’m sorry.”

“So can I have an extra-large?” With ten minutes until commencement, a line grew behind me.

“All the bags are pre-assigned.”

“Can you at least check?”

“I really don’t have any extras.” She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “I can help the next person, please?”

“Listen here, Kimberly.” I glanced down at her nametag and pointed over her shoulder. “I’m sure you were smart enough to bring a few extras of each size because sometimes these things happen.” My polite smile turned on her. “Now you look over there in your boxes and you find me an extra-large gown, because I’ve earned this and I’m not gonna’ go up in front of the whole town with my dress hangin’ out. So you find me one before I come across this table with my extra-large ass and get it myself.”

The line behind me now surrounded the table. Kimberly scurried around to a box of loose gowns, pilfering until she found my size. When she handed over the mound of red polyester, it slipped through my fingers, and fell to the floor. I picked it up, and she moved on to the next person.

From the cafeteria, I hurried to my designated classroom where a line of anxious students snaked around the perimeter. The teacher confirmed my place in line. I changed my gown and pinned my hat, and someone took a Polaroid of me standing beside the words “Class of ‘98” written on the chalkboard.

“You know, walkin’ brings on labor,” said the girl behind me.

“Yeah, girl. When you gonna’ pop that baby out?”

“My due date’s in three days.” It pissed me off when people talked about popping the baby out.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if you went into labor up on stage,” a goofy boy in glasses laughed and snorted.

“No, it would not be funny. I’m here to graduate just like everybody else, and I don’t plan to birth a child while I get my diploma. Why? You wanna’ deliver it?”

“No. Gross.” He turned his back.

“That’s what I thought.” In the following silence, I hated myself for lashing out at the poor kid and making a hormonal fool of myself. I almost started to cry, and I hated myself for that, too.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s just dumb,” the girl behind me said.

When the teacher called our attention, the line moved. We straightened our mortarboards and untangled our tassels and followed one foot in front of the other down to the football field. The band played commencement music and the scarlet line gowns broke in perfect places as we filed into neat rows of metal folding chairs. When the last student took his place, we all sat down together.

While the valedictorian spoke of the wide open future, I mourned the loss of homework and timelines and tests. I needed the comfort of my fruitful diversion, the power to have control over something, anything.

“Candice Renee Burton.”

I stepped forward on my turn, shook hands with the principal, and grasped my rolled-up mock diploma. Camera flashes captured me—the giant, red tent with the hat and

golden tassel on top. Honors. I crossed it from right to left. As I walked tall and proud back to my seat, I hoped I didn't stumble. Through the rest of the alphabet, I shifted uncomfortably. My tailbone pressed into the metal seat. When a booming voice announced the graduating class of 1998 into the real world, I was the first to stand and throw my hat in the air.

Afterward, Daddy treated us all to a steak dinner. We stopped by the house first where Momma poured everyone a champagne toast. Raising our glasses, the four of us gathered around the kitchen table.

"Here's to Candice Renee Green Burton," Momma said.

"Here, here." Josh downed his in one gulp.

I took a sip, let the sweet bubbles fill my mouth, and swallowed them down. The baby, now seven pounds, no longer swirled in my womb but waited in position near the birth canal.

"I can't," I sat my glass down. "I feel like I'm getting my baby drunk."

"I'll drink it," Josh said. And he did.

Daddy put his arm around one of my shoulders, and Momma put hers across the other. She stroked my hair like when I was little.

Momma leaned forward and said to my father. "Look what we did, Ronnie. Isn't she just wonderful?"

"You done good, little 'un." Daddy squeezed my neck.

"Thanks, y'all." I even blushed a little. "I'm just glad it's all over."

"Naw." Daddy patted my belly and shook his head. "You just gettin' started."

You can do a lot of things at eighteen—an adult in the eyes of the law. You can legally buy cigarettes and pornography, apply for a credit card and rent a hotel suite, dance at night clubs and get a tattoo. On my eighteenth birthday, I probably would have done all those in one day, but I was busy. While my classmates headed to the beach on their last senior trip, Josh and I rode silently in the purple twilight to the McKenzie Birthing Center about twenty miles south of town.

We arrived at six-thirty in the morning, as scheduled, with bags I had packed weeks before and a tenantless infant carrier properly buckled in the back seat. I didn't plan to have a baby on my birthday. My due date had come and gone the week before, and I had walked my feet flat trying to get things going. Everyday since graduation, I waddled down Sultex Road—a dead-end with s-curves and rolling hay fields—to the main road and back, almost two miles in the sticky Tennessee heat. I was swollen and miserable and pissed that I had to be pregnant longer than anybody else. But the baby held on until that Friday, when it seemed like as good a time as any, so nobody would have to take off too much work.

I got settled into my spacious pink room where everything would go down. Josh put his bag under the padded green sofa and the baby's bag behind the teal vinyl recliner on the other side of the room. I had packed a white and blue footed outfit for a boy and a frilly blue floral dress for a girl. I didn't care either way. I just wanted healthy. After changing into the hospital gown and unpacking my toiletries in the bathroom, I set up a boom box on the nightstand in the corner and put in Jimi Hendrix, *The Experience*. I climbed into bed and adjusted the air mattress to my comfort level and propped up on the pillow I'd brought from home.

When my pleasant morning nurse stuck me with the IV needle, I didn't flinch. All I could think about was food. I hadn't eaten in twelve hours and my stomach felt like it was devouring itself. She hung a bag on a metal stand.

"What's that?" I was curious about everything. I had read *What to Expect When Your Expecting*, except for the scary parts in the back.

"We're puttin' you on a Pit-drip to induce labor. In a few minutes, we'll break your water and get this show on the road."

"Sounds good to me. What's the other bag?"

She hung a larger one next to the Pitocin. "That's your meat and potatoes."

An hour later, my midwife arrived. Leigh was short and sporty with long Barbara Streisand curly hair pulled back into a ponytail. She checked my progress, which wasn't much and inserted a long plastic hook like a crochet needle. I didn't hurt, but I felt like I had just wet myself. The nurse changed my bed and I washed up and now I was ready to do the damn thing. 7:15 a.m. start time.

Three hours later, I had filled out the baby book, brushed my hair, changed the music twice, and settled on watching the Price is Right. I pulled a picture of a butterfly, orange and yellow and black, from my bag.

"Josh, will you please hang this for me?"

"That your focal point?" He examined it and smiled.

"Yeah. I want it up there." I pointed next to the light fixture above me.

He climbed on the end of my bed and wedged the paper in the ceiling tile grid.

"I love you," I said.

“I love you, too.” He brushed my hair back with his hand, and I held it near my cheek.

“We’re gonna have a baby.”

“I know.” He looked as scared as me.

The lady in the next room started her labor, and Leigh scurried back and forth to check on us. She unrolled my ticker tape and said I was coming along nicely. Momma showed up to relieve Josh who must have been hungry, but didn’t dare say anything about food.

“I bet you can beat that woman next door. I talked to the nurses, and they said you’re ahead of her.”

When the contractions commenced, I held onto the side rails and stared at the butterfly. They say pain has no memory, and I don’t remember the pain exactly, just that it hurt. Short and far apart at first, my belly tightened like a basketball inflated almost to the bursting point. I would breathe and bear down until it relaxed. At noon, the anesthesiologist drove in from the next big town over and offered some relief. Josh and I had agreed on a birthing plan; I didn’t want an epidural. I opted for a milder alternative—an intrathecal pain killer that lasted four hours. I figured in four hours, I would be sleeping soundly with a baby in the nursery. So the doctor administered the drug, observed me for a bit, and left town. A couple of my girlfriends showed up and we played spades on the tray table across my bed, Dave Matthews Band playing in the background. I raked the cards and scratched my nose raw. When Josh came back, everyone sang “Happy Birthday” in vibrant voices. I couldn’t have cake, but Momma presented me a pair of quarter carrot diamond earrings in a black felt box.

“I figured you’re old enough to keep up with nice jewelry now.” Her thick brown hair smothered my face, and I breathed in her comforting scent—cigarettes and Beautiful perfume.

I thought I better be able to keep up with more than that. “Thanks, Momma.” My words muffled, but she squeezed me tight like she heard me.

~

By seven in the evening, the drugs had worn off and I was in full fledged labor and I banged on the wall behind me to get Leigh, because nothing was going to stop me from pushing, not even the lady next door. Josh held one hand, my best friend Crystal held the other, and my mother wanted a view from the other side; she’d never seen the show below the waist. When she pulled out her disposable camera to photograph the crowning, I didn’t care. I just wanted it to be over.

“Focus on the butterfly,” Josh said.

“Fuck the stupid fucking butterfly.” My voice sounded demonic inside my head. “Get. This. Thing. Out. Of. Me.”

Leigh took position. “Okay, big push. Give me a big push.”

I bore down so hard my vision blurred and my white-knuckled hands quivered and I felt the head slide out of me. Every facial feature. I tightened around the neck.

“One more. Do it one more time.”

“I changed my mind. I don’t wanna have a baby,” I screamed.

“I can’t handle this. I’m gonna pass out.” Josh disappeared and Momma clicked another photo and took his place next to me.

“Come on, Can. Push.”

I leaned forward, thankful I didn't have anything solid to eat, because I would have pushed it rough out with everything else. I felt the contour of a slippery body—shoulders, arms, and legs. I pushed again and nine months worth of blood and fluids splashed onto the floor.

And it was over.

“Thank you, Jesus.” I lay back, molten and exhausted while everyone around me buzzed in the moment of new life.

Leigh placed the baby on my abdomen, and I felt it squirm on the outside of my skin. I could barely life my head to see if the screaming, bloody, blue body had ten fingers and ten toes.

“What is it?” Crystal asked, leaning over to see.

I thought something was wrong until Momma screamed.

“It's a girl!”

I closed my eyes and tossed up a silent prayer. “Please, God, please, don't let her be like me.”

TRAMP STAMP DEFINED

I have a tattoo with my daughter's name printed in lower case letters on the small of my back, just below the butterfly. People covered in ink—sleeves and wings and enough detailed work to call them “pieces”—know the unspoken rule: you don't point, or God forbid touch, a piece and ask what it means. But I only have one, the pink and purple and turquoise dripping-winged piece that means I don't know the rules. I touched a man's forearm once, inquiring not about him, but the fierce red dragon on his skin. He got mad like I'd just stepped on his tail.

“It's personal,” he said.

Nobody ever asks me what my tattoo means. People assume it's the regular trademark of a trashy girl branded at the turn of the millennium—one who is, was, or will be promiscuous with enough drinks involved. After all, if she would let a needle pierce her flesh, what else would she allow someone to do to her body?

But my tramp stamp holds a higher purpose. The butterfly is a symbol of my spiritual rebirth. I've been born again several times—dunked in water, anointed with oil, baptized in the Holy Spirit. I've begged forgiveness and cried for mercy and spoken in tongues. Surrounded by sweet old ladies and small children praising Jesus, I laid out in the floor while the Pentecostal dancers cast out demons and shook their tambourines. But there's nothing cleaner than the first commitment to faith. That's her middle name: faith. It's printed about an inch long under the right wing of the butterfly.

We decided on her first name when I was about four months along. Josh and I had just gotten married and the transmission in his Ford Ranger wouldn't shift out of third gear. It was the end of an era, that truck giving out. Daddy and Josh sat at the bar volleying the high resale value of Toyotas versus the reliability of a good old American made pick-up. I didn't care much for car talk, so reclined in Daddy's chair, flipping through the pages of a baby name book.

"The Dodge Ram has good haulin' power."

"Yeah, but them rear ends shore are hard to fix, you get one stuck."

"What do think about 'Abigail'? Abigail Faith Burton."

"Naw, that don't sound right," Josh said. "I'd like to get another Ford, a full size."

"How much you got to spend?"

"I've put back about a thousand dollars. I can wish all I want, truth is, I just need somethin' reliable."

I turned the page. "What about 'Alexis'?"

"A Lexus?" Josh and Daddy said at the same time.

"We can't afford one a' those."

~

After Alexis Faith Burton turned three months old, I heard Josh pull his '88 Chevy Cavalier in the driveway. The muffler had a hole in it. He took care of our daughter one night while Crystal and I spent hours at the Ringmaster piercing and tattoo shop. She took her time choosing the perfect fairy perched on the perfect daisy in the perfect spot between her shoulder blades, much bigger than mine.

Long before I was legal, I had mine all picked out. I pulled the butterfly sticker off my sunroof and drew a smaller three inch version with tribal points on either side. I put it in an accessible place where no one could see it unless I wanted them to, even myself.

Biting into my watermelon Blow-pop, I chomped as the needle pricked the skin covering my spine. When he finished the final pain, the word alexis under the left wing, I examined the fine work in the mirror. I loved the outline, the shading, the font. The whole process took an hour. It cost forty dollars. And it will be the only tattoo I ever have.

But no one ever asks, “What does that mean?”

When my shirttail rises and people get a glimpse of my piece, they never lean in close enough to read the tiny letters or dare to touch a pointed wing. I see it behind strangers’ eyes. They think I’m just another slut, probably got knocked up in high school. And that’s fine. There is an unspoken rule among girls with pieces like mine: if you take one look tramp stamp and just assume that I’m plain white trash, you can pucker up and kiss my butterfly.

TOUCHDOWN

I dropped my baby once, in a carpet warehouse in Hazel, Kentucky. I was picking out padding and soft floor coverings for the nursery, looking up at all the rows of colored carpet lined up on industrial spools along the wall. Unable to see my feet below, I cradled ten-week-old Ali in my arms. The maroon indoor/outdoor sample unrolled on the concrete appeared flat, but when my foot caught the edge of a three-inch wrinkle, I stumbled and Ali left my hold. It took a split second, but felt like slow motion.

I'd like to say we bonded the moment she was placed in my arms, that our natural connection only grew stronger with each warm day, that I passed my nurturing love to her as she suckled my breast, that she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. But that's the stuff of better mothers than me.

I loved my baby. I loved her little fingernails. Every time she wrapped her hand around my pinky, I was amazed something so tiny could have fingernails. I loved her more than a pet. I learned to nurse her and burp her and change her diaper and apply ointment to the wilting green nub of umbilical chord still hanging on. I loved her more than any painting I'd created, the Georgia O'Keefe reproduction I had spent months working on in art class. I loved her more than any scrimmage game my volleyball team had won, more than my own phone line, more than my car.

But I had not yet learned how to love anything—even my tiny baby who had done nothing wrong in the world—more than I loved myself.

Ali slept in a Moses basket on the laundry-folding table at the foot of our bed. Her woven basket was the size of size of a bed pillow. It had a small mattress and green

striped bumper pad lining the inside and handles for me to carry her from room to room. We were blessed with a good, healthy baby who only had colic the first few weeks. Josh was good about getting up with her for the four a.m. feeding, but then he left for work early every morning and came home late. He'd found second shift factory work about an hour away. I couldn't be mad that I was alone so much. He was doing it for us.

While other girls my age shopped for dorm accessories and scheduled classes, I moved like a limp ghost in the half-underground basement apartment—from the changing table to the baby swing to the recliner to the breast pump to my bed with milk soaked sheets. I rocked her and burped her and patted her back. I changed her diaper, her clothes, her sheets and swaddling blanket.

On my third straight day without sleep, I had tried everything. Ali wasn't hungry or wet or cold. She kept drawing her legs up, trying to work out the air bubbles she swallowed while nursing. I gave her the maximum amount of gas drops, burped her every two ounces. She screamed loud and long enough to almost choke, and babies that age aren't supposed to be able to cry real tears, but hers poured down her round cheeks. Over and over, she wrenched out squalls like something bit off her toe, until she ate, dozed for ten minutes, and started up again. In the lamplight of the living room, I held her out like a dripping towel.

“What. Do. You. Want from me?” I almost shook her.

She cried harder.

I placed her wailing body in the basket on the kitchen floor and walked outside into the bright sun and shut the door. I called Grandma Green.

“Well it sounds like she’s feedin’ off your worry. Babies can pick up the worry in a person. You just need to calm down.”

“But I can’t calm down with her screamin’. I don’t know what to do.”

“How long she been cryin’?”

“Since this mornin’, three days really. I’ve tried everything.”

“You know, you’re brother had the colic real bad. Let me take my beans off the stove right quick, and I’ll be over d’rectly. You just stay outside.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Not five minutes later, she pulled her Buick around the back of Daddy’s house where I paced barefoot along the concrete retaining wall, my skin souring in the heat. When she got out and hugged my neck, I felt the soft, loose skin of years having held babies. Why couldn’t I do it?

“Here now, ain’t no need in them tears. Cryin’ about it don’t do no good for that baby.” Grandma Green stood taller than me, but hunched over a little round the shoulders. Her shadow shaded my face. “You ain’t got time to feel sorry for yourself. Bein’ a mother is a right smart job.”

“Grandma, I’m goin’ completely insane. She won’t stop—all night and all day and all night again.”

“You just got a lot to learn.”

“I can’t.” I hadn’t said that about anything in a long time.

“Seems to me like you ain’t got much choice.” She tugged on my arm. “Now, let’s get in there and see about Ali.”

She didn't fall as fast as me. I weighed ten times more than her eleven pounds. Stretching with every muscle in my body, I reached to get underneath her faultless body. No hat, no blanket in the sticky summer heat, all I could picture was her soft little head like a broken egg on the concrete, her tender brain leaking out like a broken yoke. What if I killed my baby, damaged her forever?

I dove and landed on my left side. She slid into the fold of my arm. Only the ball of my elbow separated her from the hard floor. But it was enough. I caught her like the sweetest touchdown pass in history. My bone cracked under the pressure of all my weight and hers, but my adrenaline took over, mother's instinct if you will. The impact jarred Ali. She wailed long and hard, and I thanked God for her screams. Stripping her down to a diaper, I held her in front of the industrial fan to cool her body, and checked every inch of her for wounds.

I held her to my chest and brushed her white peach fuzz against my lips as I soothed, "Momma's gotcha'. It's alright. Momma's gotcha'."

Nine hours later, I lay on the couch with my cast elevated above my head, both throbbing. Ali cooed from her baby swing. Josh had come and fixed supper, but I wasn't hungry. When Daddy came downstairs to check on me, he picked up his granddaughter and nuzzled her neck.

"Bring her over here, please. I wanna' hold her." The pillows shifted as I made room with my good arm. Daddy placed her in the crease of my shoulder. "I just wanna' keep her safe with me, protect her from everything bad in the world."

"I know how you feel." He kissed my forehead. "That's what a parent does. I just hope she don't make it as hard on you as you done on me."

I held Ali close, watched her tiny fist loosen.

“Oh, Daddy.” All this time, I thought he was trying to control me, keeping me all caged up. But he was trying to protect me from harm, a parent’s job. “I’m so sorry.”

KUDZU IN A SNOW GLOBE

In the woody hills of Tennessee, we call it “the vine that ate the South.” Every year about July, a lush blanket of green kudzu spreads along the wooded edges of two-lane highways, through abandoned tobacco barns with tin roofs rusted, and up the sides of grain silos long left empty. It climbs tall trees and telephone poles, filling them out in lumpy shapes like dinosaurs. Vines grow a foot a day in good weather, and every few inches, green leaflets sprout in groups of three, each the size of small child’s hand held out for more.

Kudzu took over the ditch in the back lot of my first real house. I had just turned eighteen, legal to live alone outside the protective reign of Momma and Daddy. Instead, I lived under the protective reign of my husband. A few months after our daughter was born, the three of us moved into our own home.

One double’o seven East Blythe Street. It sat at the bottom of a steep hill a block off the main road in a small town deep in the heart of the Bible belt. Pretty as a Christmas card with white vinyl siding and maroon shutters, it had a manicured flower bed and a wooden white fence and a covered front porch big enough for a swing. Inside, both bedrooms were decent sized, and the bathroom had a claw-foot porcelain tub. We barely owned enough cast-off furniture to fill the place, but it came with two lots and a shed for the john boat.

On Labor Day weekend, all the men in my family came over with mowers and weed-eaters to help Josh clear out the kudzu. It had been years since the old lady who

lived there before was able to tend the land. Or maybe she had been able, but didn't. Maybe she had wanted to keep her secret.

A sloping cover of green spades lay over the sharp embankment by the ditch. It softened the landscape like a tossed bed sheet made of a thousand leaves. Along the ground, vines coiled over the underbrush and girdled up the trunks of the skinny pines and old oaks lining the edge of the yard.

From my view at the kitchen window, I thought it was beautiful. Under all that green, I pictured a thriving land of chirping birds and hopping rabbits like the kudzu had woven a drapery of goodness, a secret place where all the woodland animals in town gathered together under a lovely shade. I liked the curly-q tendrils, how they tangled in the canopy and dripped back down to the ground, just to climb up all over again.

"Y'all thirsty?" I hollered from the back porch, waving to all the men with their motors running. When I toted out a pitcher of sweet ice tea in one hand and a baby in the other, engines cut off and the fellas sauntered over for a cool drink. My brother stayed by the ditch, yanking at a blanket of stubborn vines.

"I like the kudzu." I passed out cups and filled them.

"It may look purty," Daddy said, pausing for a sip. "But it ain't no paradise."

Josh held his arms out wide as they could go. "I found one runner 'bout thirty feet long, big a round as my hand." He made a fist.

"That'd be good for the hill up yonder, keep the topsoil from washin' out in the rain." Daddy pointed to the other side of the ditch, steep terrain beyond our property line. "But you don't want this culvert fillin' up. Left to grow wild, all that kudzu'll mess up the drainage and take over the yard, block out all the sun so can't nothin' else grow."

“We need a good yard for a swing set, don’t we, baby girl?” I bounced her on my knee. Nothing on but a diaper and a grin, she giggled and played with an empty cup.

“One time, I seen a hundred-year-old hardwood laid out on the ground by kudzu—the whole tree uprooted and collapsed, it got so top heavy.” Josh took off his baseball cap and waved it in the air. “Then the creeper moved on to the next tall tree.”

“Hey, I found somethin’ over here.” Grasping a handful of vines, my brother tugged hard. He fell backward and landed on the edge of the embankment. Loud clanks of tumbling glass roused us all to our feet. “Look a’ here at all the mouthwash bottles.”

“Ole Widow Witherspoon musta’ pulled ten swigs a day.” Daddy eyed the mound of reflecting glass. “Christian woman like her don’t dare keep liquor in the house.”

“But she stayed drunkern’ a circus monkey,” my brother laughed.

“No wonder her kids put her in ‘the home.’” I stood there barefoot in the backyard with a baby on my hip, wondering how a person could be so miserable she got lit on Listerine everyday.

“Just as well,” Josh kissed me on the cheek. “We got the place.”

~

For a year, I was a stay-at-home mom, the hardest job I ever held. I cooked and cleaned and cared for the baby around the clock every day of the week. I was a mother and a homemaker, destiny fulfilled. But at nineteen, I still had a lot of get left in me. I needed more space to grow. So I got a babysitter and a part-time job at a law office and an application for Murray State University.

At school I learned about history and psychology and world civilizations. At work I learned about business and justice and logic. It didn't take long before I wanted more than my little slice of hometown.

One night after class, I sat in the driveway for an hour, buckled in my four-door family sedan, coaxing myself to the front door. I had a kind husband, a growing toddler, a little white house with a little white fence, and a swing set in the backyard. Some people worked all their lives to get here. But I was still a teenager, too green for a marriage and a mortgage and all the roots that came with them.

“You always want more.” Josh said it like it was a bad thing.

“I just refuse to settle.”

“Can't you be happy with what we have— a nice house like you wanted.

Everybody's healthy. I make a decent livin' workin' construction. What else do you need?”

With his tough hands, Josh earned every cent of his paycheck. He said Grace at the supper table, tucked in his daughter at bedtime, and carried a gun to protect his own. He wanted nothing more than to hunt and fish and provide for us. His parents had never given him a decent home, and here he'd made one of his own.

But I wasn't done. I dreamed of high rise condos in the anonymity of the city, a corner skyscraper office. I wanted to sip wine at gallery openings and see Broadway musicals. I wanted culture and opportunity for myself and my daughter. I wanted out.

After the first semester, my demeanor changed from long fuse, big bang— saving up all the little things until I exploded in hateful wrath— to rapid-fire pellets of constant criticism. Every time Josh left a dirty sock on the floor or folded the towels wrong or

bought white bread instead of wheat, I came unleashed. He fought back at first, and then he turned into a tight-lipped, slumped-shouldered presence, like he just didn't care anymore. He had settled into the idea that he would never be able to please me.

As our daughter developed her own personality, she soaked in the negativity hovering inside the house. Instead of smiling and running to me with arms spread, she whined, bit, slapped, and told me "no." She spent a half hour a day in time out by the trash can. It seemed like all I did anymore was bitch and punish. I hated my life, the person I had become.

But I had fallen in love and shimmied off my jean shorts for a hat-tipping, broad-backed bull rider with the muscles of a young farmhand. I had done the right thing and gotten hitched up forever to a cowboy who didn't play games. I knew just who I was getting under that old hat. No matter how many hissy fits I threw, how miserable I made him, Josh would never leave me. He was too country for that.

At first I thought I could play content and live for the precious moments, make nice and pretty on the outside like a happy little trinket. I tried to grow within my means, the transparent globe I had placed around my life, and suppress the dreams of a world beyond my reach. But over years layering resentment—everyday questioning "what if"—I knew I would destroy that perfect little life. Maybe I'd turn to drinking something stronger than mouthwash, hide bottles in the back ditch, and conceal the proof.

Like a cluster of leaves unfurling beside another cluster of leaves beside another cluster, I wouldn't do it on purpose, but I would block out the light. I would suffocate the ones I loved. Climbing wild, I would slither up the backyard and encircle the house. I would weave through fence posts and up the blooming Magnolia in the side yard. I

would cover thick on the front shrubs and coil up the gutters and collapse the roof,
wrapping around and around until I smothered it all.

Or I could bust out the glass.

BACK OF DADDY'S HARLEY

By the Fourth of July 2008, Daddy had worked himself back to ninety-percent of the man he used to be. I knew he wouldn't offer if he didn't think he was able, but I had to think a minute about climbing on the back of his Harley. All cleaned up for the ride in his nice jeans and alligator boots, he pulled the steel hoss up in the front yard. We sat in the front porch swing, watching the sunset behind the newly built water tower across the highway. The tulip poplar Momma planted almost thirty years before bloomed thick in the middle of the yard.

After the aneurism, Daddy enjoyed every penny of his hard earned money. He deserved it. so at fifty-six, he spent a good part of my inheritance on what I called "the Midlife Motorcycle." It had a windshield and cushioned back rests. The sleek maroon tanks rounded out to down to black leather seat to the chrome under-workings.

"I bet it's been a long time since you was on the back a one of these."

"Ali took me for a ride on her four-wheeler yesterday. Does that count?" Josh had gotten her one for her birthday, traded for a boat motor.

"She do alright drivin'?" Daddy rolled up the right sleeve of his orange Harley button down, folded twice

"Crashed it first thing," I couldn't help but laugh. "She put it in reverse and gave it a little gas. We didn't move, so she mashed down the throttle. We shot straight back and slammed into the side of Josh's truck. Left a dent behind the back tire, big as a basketball."

Daddy chuckled. "He get mad?"

“No.” I shook my head and looked off. My gaze followed the first lightning bug of the evening. “I’m the one who freaked out. I started in about helmets and safety courses. When I started to get off, Josh told me to calm down.” I deepened my voice. “He said, ‘If you don’t make a big deal about it, she won’t be scared to try again. Girl’s got to learn.’”

“He’s right.” Daddy worked the other sleeve, but had trouble folding the cuff.

I took his sleeve, rolled it up for him, and continued on so as not to embarrass him. “I hung onto her waist while Josh helped her put it back in first gear, showed her how to cut the front wheel so we didn’t drive off in the culvert three feet in front of us.”

“She cleared it, didn’t she?”

“Yeah she did—drove me down to the lake, right there at Buchanan Resort by the boat ramp. She showed me the grassy clearing where she brings their dogs for walks and the tree she climbs and the spot by the water where she writes songs in her journal.” I drew a circle in the air. “After we made the loop, she pulled back in the driveway and parked a few feet in front of the house.”

“Josh got himself a pretty decent place. I been out there before.”

“Ali’s got her own room and a big yard, a lot more space to run. All she’s ever known with me is traffic and street lights.” The shadow of the tulip polar crept up to the porch. “Daddy, it was so strange for her to drive, me just along for the ride.”

“Baby girl’s growin’ up on you.” He patted my knee.

“Maybe she needs a little freedom from me always standing over her—a chance to discover herself. I think I’ve done a good enough job so far.”

“You really thinkin’ about lettin’ her move up here?” Daddy stroked his moustache with his thumbnail.

“I don’t know.” I stopped the swing and leaned forward. “But I understand Ali wanting to spend time with her daddy. She almost didn’t have one.”

“I guess you know somethin’ about that.”

~

The year before on Halloween, I met Daddy in a small exam room in the ER of Methodist Hospital in Memphis. The MRA from Henry County showed an aneurism, a ticking bomb the size of a pencil eraser, in Daddy’s brain. When Grandma and Aunt Sandy left to find the ladies’ room, Daddy sat up straight on the end of the exam table. He looked fine to me. I sat next to him and pulled his hand to my cheek.

“I got all my accounts at the Holley Credit Union.” He cleared his throat. “Last Christmas I showed you how to get into the safe. You remember the combination?”

“Yes, and the key is in the wooden box on your dresser.”

“You gotta’ have ‘em both to open it.”

“I know, Daddy.” I tried not to rouse him. “Let’s not talk about this. You’re going to be fine. The doctors—”

He jerked his hand away, “By God we *are* gonna’ talk about this, and I mean *right* now.”

I moved the chair, took a notebook from my bag, and made a list while Daddy recited the contents of his vault safe.

“First shelf: deed to the house, title to the ’48 and the Monte Carlo, deed to the family farmland, and that little white house a’ yours over on Blythe Street. All free and clear. I don’t owe nobody a cent.”

I wrote fast, drew a picture of the open safe.

“Second shelf: life insurance policy and papers about the cemetery plot. In a blue envelope, there’s three \$1000 bills, probably worth somethin’ by now, and about five hundred in regular cash to take care ‘a anything up front. My birth certificate and social security card’s in the drawer. You’ll need all that.

“In the bottom next to my pistol—it’s loaded, so be careful—there’s two green label Jack bottles fulla’ change.” Daddy relaxed his shoulders and spoke to me like an equal. “If somethin’ happens to me, Candice, you’re in charge.”

“I can handle it. You raised me that way.” At twenty-seven, I had a college degree and a financial career and a nine-year-old daughter.

The next day, the top neurosurgeon in the state inserted a tiny clamp onto the swollen blood vessel in Daddy’s brain, said the monster hid in a tough spot—a real pleasure to work on. But there had been some bleeding, leaking into crevices of gray matter. Daddy had a small stroke, and only time would reveal how much damage was done.

His left eye swollen shut, his skin was purple and bulbous like it would split straight down his cheek. A dozen staples ran four inches back from his temple. Dried remnants of blood speckled about his face. It was twisted filthy straight, crooked in a sense. My daddy was half gone. Something absent and helpless took over the right side vessel of a body, moaning and calling words that made no sense. I should have stood by

his bedside with Grandma and Aunt Sandy, offering my familiar voice like the doctor instructed, calling his name.

But all I could see amidst the bustling scrubs were Daddy's hands—his leathery skin always blistered from welding and working the backhoe, his thick fingers and blackened thumb nail—taped with wires and IV tubes. That wasn't him in there, not my Daddy.

Over the next month, I spent more time at the hospital than I can remember. He was paralyzed on the right side, couldn't even lift his thumb. Time blended together as Daddy transferred from one ward to another—Intensive Care, Neurology Wing, In-patient Physical Therapy. He became more alert each day, more aware of his paralysis and frustrated with his restrictions. I washed his soiled clothes and brought him the home cooked meals he used to love, but his sensory nerves were damaged.

“Everything tastes like shit,” Daddy said from his wheel chair.

Two days before Thanksgiving his doctor signed the release to out-patient care and Daddy returned home where Grandma cared for him during the day. After family Christmas dinner, I created a spreadsheet for his medication, typed in 20 point font so Grandma could read the days, times and milligrams. By Easter weekend I noticed she had scrawled through half the list and added a helpful column titled *Pill Looks Like*. I prepared the 7:00 p.m. dose of two white oval pills, one round blue, and one orange. I drew a tick mark under the Saturday Night box.

Most days, he sat in his big blue recliner and watched westerns and cried all the time. In mid stuttering sentence he just broke down, apologizing for not keeping himself together. His doctor prescribed an anti-depressant—another pill added to the medication

spreadsheet. After a week of moping, Daddy set to work rebuilding himself like that old truck in the garage. I followed him out one night, watching him organize his wrenches and sockets, seeing if he could lift the heavy ones, wondering how much control he had left.

“Them physical therapists been workin’ with me. You know, I can brush my teeth with my right hand now. I know it don’t sound like much.”

“I’m just glad you’re here.”

~

In a little over a year’s time, Daddy worked his way around the garage from screwdrivers to drills, to saws, to the arc welder in the front corner. He’d started back to work the week before, taken the Harley out several times, but I hadn’t ridden with him yet.

“The fireworks start at dark.” Daddy stepped off the porch and unbuckled the saddle bag. “Here, put this on.”

I tucked my long hair under the helmet and tightened the chin strap. Daddy got on first and steadied the hoss. Holding onto his shoulder, I threw one leg over and fit perfectly in my spot between the backrests, locked in. If Daddy cut a corner too sharp—laid it down—my body was going with it.

He cranked up the engine and the deep, fierce rumble of a real Harley soaked into the woods. Out on the lake highway, I held onto his belt loops as Daddy kicked her in high gear. We rode to beat the sunset, timed it just right. As we neared the Ned McWherter Bridge, cars lined the edge of the highway. A thick crowd covered banks of

Paris Landing state park on the right. Somewhere in those all those faces, Ali had stood beside her father, eyes turned toward the sky, making her own memory.

Boats scattered across the water as far as I could see, hundreds of dim lights competing with the country stars. Slowing down, Daddy drove us onto the bridge and we left the land behind over the bridge where Josh had seen the Lord after our first date and a hundred yards below, an old muzzle loader rusted to pieces under years of silt.

Above a barge in the middle the river, I saw a burst of light, and then heard the shot. Daddy minded the road. I watched the black canvas spread above me explode with spindles of light—dozens of flowers painted in flame. They appeared for only a moment—a flash of white center with streaking blue petals, orange ones with bright, shimmering tips. An overwhelming red covered all the others. Smaller white ones broke off into crackling spirals like baby’s breath. As they dripped and faded away, others sprung forth.

I looked back at the crowd on the river bank, frozen. Ali was my life’s work, the reason for every decision I had made. But I had never been grown-up Candice without her. In ten years, I had achieved everything I set out to do from the beginning, and my daughter wanted to move back to the small town where it all began.

I knew better than anybody how much a girl needs her daddy.

Over the water, the grand finale blasted in royal purples and kudzu greens and sparkling yellows. Daddy hit the gas. My body vibrated, and I threw my arms out against the wind until we made land on the other side.