

CHAR - OLD SAYBROOK, CT

My fingernails are grubby, and my hands are tan under smudges. I pour from my water jug into a washcloth and squeeze out a drop of Dawn dish soap. I rub a spot off the cotton Van Heusen long sleeve button-down shirt bought from a thrift store a month ago. I'm a wanderer but a tidy one. I also have a peasant blouse with red embroidery on it that I got for 50 cents. It's cooler, so I opt for long sleeves today. I clean my hands, reach under my T-shirt to do my arm pits, and down my shorts. That's called a whore's bath, you know? Exit 67 off I-95 had a sign for Turtle Creek Preserve, Connecticut River, which sounded nice and maybe deserted. I never figured on stopping here. But I was on the main route north. Tired and hungry.

At 7 a.m., after driving all night, I pulled into this place, a fantastic living complex, amazing lawns. A fancy place. People live here, I guess. I parked behind a few other cars at the far end of a horseshow driveway. Hungry, hungry. I snuck around back. Slate grey buildings, million-dollar buildings, la dee da. I only cared that I smelled toast from a glassed in room, no one in there, so I tiptoed in and scarfed it. All day, no one noticed Fiona, my 60S VW wagon, in the line of cars. I slept for a few hours in the back seat, then hiked around the river preserve.

It's after dark, late, and I'm back in Fiona, but I gotta pee. I get out, squat behind a shrub and pull down my shorts. An employee with her bag and sweater over her arm comes out and sees me.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, in a hush. "Move around back and hide that wagon behind the trees." She wears a grey staff uniform dress and serviceable white shoes. "Don't make any noise, *por Dios*."

A bunny hops on the lawn between me and her. "*Pobracito!*" She rolls the "r". Unbelievably she doesn't call the guard but takes off in her decrepit SUV Highlander. Kids and

an unemployed husband are at home, a low-income apartment, I bet. She knows the score. I nickname her “Maria.”

Fiona starts but won't go into second gear. CRAP! I pop her into third and jerk forward. Now, I'm stalled behind the trees around back, and I see the glassed room windows gleam in moonlight across the lawn.

Maybe I'm a romantic character to Maria, a free spirit. She was shut up in inside, second shift. She didn't see tonight's sunset, a stone white and baby blue glow with pink around the edges. Maybe she reads romantic mysteries. Maybe after following recipes and doing housecleaning chores, she looks at the pages and at me as freedom she doesn't have. Or maybe she thinks I'm a bum.

CRAP! I say aloud, as I often do. I then follow up with talking to myself to figure things out and not get lonely. “Maybe I can get the coffee and toast again from that glassed in room. I still don't see anybody in there,” I say.

No Food. No money. Fiona is broken. CRAP!

I've always been uncomfortable, even in the birth canal. I had a reoccurring dream about that when I was a kid. My head was tucked to my chin in the darkness and only a dim brightness shone beyond my toes. I struggled to gaze into the pinhole passage toward light. Mostly it's a white wash, but I will myself to see rainbows. Wide curved flanges flanked both sides, and a hooked tailbone blocked the way. My wrists and ankles were crossed, and knees and arms drawn up tightly. I was tied in a knot.

It feels better to get mad than scared. So, I got into a decent fit but couldn't stop the buzzing worry under my skin. I didn't know I'd never lose that feeling for my whole life. I squirmed until my leg went out straight. I felt a grip around my ankle, and a hand appeared in the

womb beside me. I felt a slight tug on my foot. It was the scrubbed delivery doctor. But my shoulder was stuck on a pelvic bone, the umbilical cord was squeezed, and I couldn't breathe. I tried to scream, but nothing came out.

The imaging monitor alerted the doc about my shoulder. He yelled, "Caesarian. NOW!"

The surgical team leapt into action.

I felt a hand tuck my shoulder in and a big tug that pulled me through to the light.

"How the hell did she get out of there?" roared the doc, with a scalpel in his hands. A surprised nurse caught me.

"She's not breathing. Chest compression. Ventilation," called the physician.

"Breathe," I heard a voice, and fingers gently pushed on my chest.

I sucked in, let out a scream. My legs pumped to run.

"She made it. It's a miracle," said the delivery doctor; his hands hadn't yet reached my chest, and the nurse was fetching the ventilation bag and mask.

"Good thing she breathed on her own, fast. Jesus," said the mystified doc.

Impossibilities. Story of my life. The voice, the hand, the fingers – that was the first time I felt and heard something no one else could. I figure angels are looking out for me, like the athletic cherub that could crouch on Fiona's roof when I took mountain "S" curves across country and needed a brake job. I took sharp turns and nearly lost her, sputtering mad, off the roof. Furious to catch up, she flapped her wings and latched onto the roof again, determined to protect me.

It's a warm September day. I pull on the same shorts. I've been hiking and hustling for a year. Four seasons in Fiona. A whole year's calendar filled with relief. My brown-red hair is long and straight, down the middle of my back. Just after I hooked up with Fiona, I left Gunnison, a

po-dunk town in Colorado, where I lived with foster parents since I was seven. Hiding from truth works, so I don't think about life before that.

If there are two people that I'm grateful for, it's my foster parents 'cause they kept me twelve years, but I'm not getting all gushy about that. They even thought that it was a good idea for me to go to community college and helped me save money and get grants. I took two years of courses.

I don't want to think about life at community college either. My best friend liked it in Gunnison. The boy in biology class, the brick buildings. She walked down the dusty roads, singing and kicking stones.

I would have gotten married. To the cute kid who rocked me in the back of the VW wagon at night. I'd end up with three kids, no, four. I'd pull out a beat-up vacuum with the wires showing through at the plug end, three times a week. I hate vacuums. I don't like the noise and pulling the clunky things around, the cords snarled on chair legs. I'd probably be cleaning at some retirement place, like Maria. I'd pick up chicken fingers for the kids on the way home and a six-pack. The cute kid I had dated in college would turn into a fat man who did roofing for a living.

I was always reading, even when I got to my foster parents. I'm not talking about how I learned to read. Every week, they took me to the small-town public library, and I'd gather an armful of books. The school librarians got clued into my interests and picked out books for me. In that first kid's poetry book, I was the fairy with a secondhand shop in the grass.

Down in the grasses...

Where the grasshoppers hop

And the katydids quarrel

And the flutter-moths flop...

She sells lost thimbles

For Fairy milk pails

And burnt-out matches

For fence posts and rails.

I was Ivan who rode on the wolf's back to escape his murdering brothers and save the princess.

I was *Gentle Ben* when he tore out of his cage after the plane crash in the northern wilds, free and still in love with Mark, who saved him. I was Sarah, in *The Little Princess*. She lived in luxury. Then lost everything and struggled alone, like me. I still have to force myself to be good like her. She was unselfish and giving, just because. How did she do that? She got rich again in the end. Maybe, if I'm good...

Tall, skinny, grey-haired Mr. Butler in ninth grade pulled me aside in the library. He wore heavy wool plaid shirts even in summer, soaked in B.O. All day, his breath smelled like he had just opened his mouth in the morning after a bender. I'm sure he'd never been on a bender though. Can't imagine that.

He pulled *Pride and Prejudice* from the shelf.

"You'll like this book," he said, "Read ten pages a night. It won't be easy, but worth it at the end."

I struggled with the old language, but kept going, to get smarter. Mr. Butler asked me about the book every day. When Elizabeth got Mr. Darcy in the end, I was so happy. I want what I read about. I want to be a happy fairy, a good Sarah, and in love like Elizabeth.

One hippie professor in college made us read the *One-Dimensional Man*, philosophy stuff. It was about questioning the status quo. Did he do that? Is that why he was at such a crummy college instead of Harvard? Was he looking to get a service award for keeping himself down?

This hippie professor took us to dance to the Beatles in the Little Brown Jug Bar and drink beers even though we were underage. He had a paunch belly and balding blond hair, blue eyes, and a nice smile, as he swung his hips to "Paperback Writer." He told me I should write a book someday. Me, a paperback writer.

Walking, hitchhiking in the rain or snow or heat to college classes, I felt like a coal miner in *Germinal*. I felt like I trudged from shack to the shaft, out of sight from the landowners' mansions. After the last page, of any book, I could always start another story. I wasn't stuck. There was another adventure. Another life to think about. Not like the buildings of that community college which would never change. The teachers would never get a better life than teaching poor kids like me. The boys I dated would all end up roofers.

I walked by those red crumbling buildings and wanted to pick up a brick and throw it through the window. I was looking for something, and the restlessness only went away when my nose was in a book in that dilapidated library.

One night, the cute guy in the backseat said I could have the VW wagon. He was leaving for the army. That night we did it seven times in a row, including two suck offs, to beat our record. There you have it. Or he got it, and I got Fiona. After we finished the Boones Farm Strawberry.

I had to leave college.

HAD TO. Even though that hippie professor was kind, and I learned some about the one-dimensional man. Piecemeal, bits by bits of learning weren't good enough. I wanted something big. I didn't like the path through the world at that campus. It would lead nowhere. I'd have to find a better place and graduate some day with guys who would become more than roofers.

Plus, I hate to think about this, but I'm pretty sure I had lost a baby. It had been a few weeks. I cried sitting on the toilet over a bloody mess. I was used and empty and sick of what was in front of my face, including the mirror.

I left town in Fiona, and here I am. I send post cards to my foster parents and hope they will visit for Christmas when I settle down. Which I will. They never went to college, but they wanted me to go. In one card, I promised them I would finish college. To do what they couldn't have done. Or never had kids to do. They wanted them. Sometimes women can't get pregnant. Or maybe it's the man's fault? I wish I hadn't gotten pregnant. CRAP. I was the only one around to make their dreams come true.

Someday, I'll send them plane tickets. They'll stay in my house, and I'll show them my gold-embossed diploma framed in high gloss cherry. I'll never miscarry again. Fiona is way cool, built in the 60s to go forever, not that I know what I'm doing tomorrow. Her passenger's door won't close and hangs off crooked, so I pick up the bottom corner and shove it into place. I got some rope to tie it on.

I pull my backpack from the back seat, hike it over one shoulder. It's tan with an aluminum frame from a secondhand shop outside Big Bend National Park. The pack had a ripped, ragged tear at the top that I covered with a piece of my jeans when I cut them into shorts. I carry a scissors, needle, and thread. I'm not dumb. Near the hole in the pack, there's a patch that says, *Great Meteor Crater*, with an astronaut in a space suit with an oxygen tank on his back

in front of a big hole in the ground. End of life as we know it. Meteor doomsday. Actually, the end of the earth is around 1,000,002,021 when the sun goes out. Supposedly this crater is real in Arizona someplace.

With the pack, I also got a second-hand cooking pot and a wool navy pea coat. I used the coat as a blanket when Fiona and I parked for the night, high in those Texas buttes. There was snow on the rocks in the morning. I found a beat-up mattress down along the river. Probably spermy. Somebodies had spent a summer gettin' it on, camping off trail in the park.

My stomach growls. Hungry. I look over my shoulder. Nobody around. Nothing threatening. Fiona is hidden. I round a huge slouching pine tree, three stories high, with bows that swoop from the center trunk and down into a garden. A squirrel chases a squirrel. And they aren't playing. It's about territory or food.

There was a pine tree like that in my foster parents' back yard. When I was nine, I figured I better teach myself to be brave. I reached up and grabbed a sweeping branch of that tree with both hands and stepped on a lower one that nearly touched the ground. I hung on, my kneecaps shaking, and walked up the lower branch. Inching along with my fingers on the higher one, I reached a crotch in the tree. I could see into the upstairs bedroom windows. I stepped off the branch and sat there for three hours. It started to rain, and the sun was out behind me so a rainbow hung beyond the house, somewhere I wanted to go to turn myself blue or indigo. I left the earth behind.

But I came down, reluctantly, to make dinner for my foster mom before she got home from work.

I didn't know then, but I do now. There's value in the dirt, the pond water, the bon fire parties with my friends, and cheap wine, civil rights which blacks were fighting for, a letter of

recommendation from that paunchy professor, history if people told the truth about it, free elections as long as they lasted, beauty queens and Olympic athletes, setting a good example like Sarah, making good with what you had like the fairy. And Gentle Ben's love, which I don't know much about yet.

I wasn't finished getting brave, back that day when I was nine. I picked up a big stick from the ground. Tore off the branches and peeled the bark until it was smooth and shiny. Strong. I held it up like sword and willed myself to be a warrior. Investigating my body at attention, I swung the stick at the air. I swung again, imagining evil in front of me, snakes or disease or thieves. I imagined myself invisible, like the hands or voices that came to me at times. I would never lose a fight. I would never give up who I am. I swatted the air until I sweated. I tucked courage in my back pocket.

Maybe for some people, being an adult is a big disappointment and unfair. Maybe they had a great childhood and go from happiness to shit as an adult. I come from shit. I can only go up. I won't be disappointed. Maybe I should feel sorry for those who use up all their "happy credits", and I've saved mine.

I'm going to have a house someday, with a bathroom for each of the three bedrooms. I'll have a full four-year college degree, not from a place with crumbling bricks and toilets that don't flush. I'll have a great job in business and a stock portfolio. I'll be my own fairytale.

I sneak my way over to the glassed room steps and up to the door. I see someone leave who wears white pants and a shirt. On the table, I see the coffee mug, a small pitcher, and toast. My stomach is growling. I'm an unemployed peon. No. A student. I'll be a student again. I'm just helping myself. With my mouth watering, I put my hand on the knob and pull on the door that comes silently open. I glance quickly around. There's a wheelchair in the corner with

blankets piled on it. That wasn't here yesterday. I sneak over and grab the toast, munch it down. About to take hold of the tea pot, I feel eyes on me.

"Who are you?" says the pile of blankets on the wheelchair.

I jump, spill coffee on the table and splash some on my white cotton t-shirt with orange lettering that says, "Juicy Juice – 100% POW!" I can't afford to do laundry often, so the coffee stain is a pain. For a vagrant, I'm a neat freak.

I'm sure I'm about to get reamed out, but I don't run. I face indignity. Brown rheumy eyes look at me from a wrinkled face in a wispy cloud of white hair on a head that rose from a bony shoulder.

"Do you want some coffee?" I ask. Being polite might get me out of this.

"No, thanks," she says. "I won't be drinking coffee anymore. Or eating the toast."

"Can I come get it tomorrow then?"

"Sure."

I pour out the coffee into the cup, add milk, drink it quickly, and give myself a warm rush.

I stare at her. She looks like one of those hands or voices that only I can see.

"What's the deal here?" I ask.

I feel like a human subject in an experiment. I should have a name tag.

"I'm Char," I say.

"I'm Lottie," she says.

"Are you going to report me?" I'm not worried.

"I'm not sure you're real."

Cool! I think and look forward to tomorrow's breakfast.

“Does anyone come in here?” I ask Lottie.

“The nurse comes every two hours or if I push a button. And the doctor checks in twice a day.”

Her breath comes in wheezes. Her fingers and brow are pale. Her lips do remember how to smile and turn up at the corners.

Phew. I can relax a few minutes. I sit on a sofa with fancy arm covers.

There’s a long silence.

“I live in my VW Wagon, and I’m travelling,” I say for conversation.

“How nice.”

“Are you all there?” I can be rude.

Lottie lifts her hand from her lap and pulls the blanket and robe away from her neck, shoulders, and waist. She pats her lap. She peers over her waist to see her feet on the pedals on the floor.

“Yes.”

She settles the robe and blanket back on her chest.

“I read the *Picture of Dorian Gray* when I was your age,” Lottie says.

“What’s that about?” I ask. “Who wrote it?”

“Oscar Wilde. A wealthy young man thinks much of his property and looks. A friend paints a portrait of him. The young man trades his soul to ensure that the picture will age and decay. So, the man stays beautiful, and the picture gets ugly to reflect his dissolute life and sins.

Am I a picture of you?”

I ignore what she says; that doesn’t make sense.

“How does that book end?”

“The wealthy, beautiful man discovers the portrait and tries to destroy it, so he kills himself in the process.”

I’m sad. This is not the fairy poem or Sarah or Gentle Ben. Even though the father in Gentle Ben was mean, the story comes out okay in the end.

“You might like Pip and Davy,” she says.

“Who are those people?” I ask.

“What people?” She looks around, toward the window as if she could see someone there.

“Pip and Davy?”

“They are characters from Charles Dickens’s novels.”

“I haven’t read those books, but my high school teacher recommended *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The World According to Garp*. Then I had to think about being a lawyer or a writer.”

Books have always bossed me around.

“Very good,” says Lottie.

Lottie’s head nods, and she closes her eyes.

“Are you OK?” I ask.

I think about leaving but want to know more.

“What happens to them? Those characters?” I ask.

Lottie lifts her head, gives me a rolling-her-eyes kind of smile, like she’s spent six hours a day with me her whole life. The sun streams through the windows, and shadows tremble on the floor.

“Well, each book is about a young man, born into hard times. People help them. In one case, a convict. In another, a family member. Pip messes up but becomes a kind and successful

businessman. David Copperfield makes a fortune as a writer. Both of them marry their true loves in the end.”

Bossy books. Now I gotta think about being a businessman. And a writer again. I gotta fall in love, for real, like what happens in books.

“Why do writers write about writers?” I ask.

No answer. She reaches her hand toward the window, then toward me.

“Why are all the stories about men?” I ask.

“They’re not,” says Lottie. “You could read many books by woman authors like....Edith...Virgini...”

Her head lolls. She is asleep in the middle of her sentence. The names are dandelions that never came through the cracks in the sidewalk.

“Get outta here,” I tell myself. “The nurse will come back soon.” But I walk over to touch the hand she held out to me, now in her lap. My fingers are warm against her cool, time-worn skin.

Lottie is weird and old. But she listens to me. For the first time since I went to school, I feel like I don’t have to hide parts of myself. I look around the room, with the sofa, meals delivered, and big windows that look down toward the ocean.

CRAP. Am I ever going to send plane tickets to my foster parents to visit me? I’ll need more than a place to park for the night.

Lottie was talking again.

“You could meet Pip and Davy at the Wesleyan Library. At a university near here. I’ve lectured there. It’s a good school. You could go there and start on the way to a good life. They have grants for kids.”

“For kids who live in cars?”

“Why not?”

My mind spins and goes all black, no reflections, nothing visible. Only enough light to see shadow. I will rainbow reds to yellows to indigo to appear. I see an eye as if looking into a false mirror, and the iris is clouds and a blue sky. If I'm on a journey and this old lady is the journey's end, I think about what's in between. It's more than frickin' stealing food and hoping the brakes or gears work. I've been a long time on the road. Maybe long enough. Maybe I'm ready for another story. I wonder if Fiona would make it to the Admissions Office at this Wesleyan place.