


SOMETHING GAINED




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Something Gained

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
Austin Peay State University

Tabitha Vires Swearingen

August, 2000

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Pete Vires

and

Wanda Todd Vires

for their endless love and support throughout the years.

and to my husband,

Tim Swearingen

for his patience, understanding, and love.

ABSTRACT

This work consists of a collection of short stories. The stories are meant to be read separately; however, the main characters in each maintain a thread of innocence that binds the stories together. The characters face obstacles that challenge their beliefs or innocence and sometimes strip it away. As the characters learn, there is something to be gained from everything that is lost.

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INTRODUCTION

“Something Gained” is a collection of short stories that explores varying degrees of innocence. In each of the stories the main characters are women who have not taken control of at least one aspect of their lives. Because they are living under the shadow of someone or something else, they retain a degree of innocence in their lives. When these women are forced to come out of the shadow through violence or personal necessity, they must find their strength and grow as an individual.

Because the women in these stories represent different age groups and lifestyles, their situations are unique. The women are passionate about their lives and do not always see that they are traveling toward destruction. When they reach a critical point where a decision must be made, they rise to the occasion.

Just Down the Road

Martha bent down to pick up the picture that had fallen to the floor. There were so many without faces or dates. She wondered why people took pictures of the landscape in the first place, but knew she was guilty of it herself. Those always ended up just taking more space in the big box Martha kept under the bed. When she turned the picture over, she remembered the man and the house. This was the picture she had promised to paint for him. It had been taken in the spring, so the trees around the house were alive with whites and pinks and reds. Where there was still paint left, the house had a reddish tint to it, magnified by the sun. And there he was, in the rocker.

"What are you looking at?" Paul asked.

"Just a picture," said Martha.

"Picture of what?"

"Remember Jack. He lived in the old quarters?"

"Yeah, I remember him. Hey, did you already take that box of papers from my desk? I can't find them."

"Don't know. I might have."

Martha slid the picture back through the slot in the top of the box and wondered if she could ever really talk about what she saw that night. For the rest of the afternoon they moved boxes from the bedroom to the U-Haul. She found the paints she hadn't touched in at least two years. She loved to paint in high school and had even painted through college. After the children came, there

wasn't as much time. It was hard to keep the paints out with children running around, and if she put them away it just made it harder the next time. She had begun putting her finished work away in the back of the closet, then even the new canvases were put there to be kicked or knocked around any time someone needed the wrapping paper or a box from the shelf. The paints were probably dried by now.

Martha was amazed at the amount of junk they had collected. Like everyone else, they hadn't thought it was junk at the time. She kept the little scraps and memorabilia to look back on and hold in her hand as concrete evidence of the things they had done. She could run her fingers over the cotton balls that had been used to make Santa's beard and think about the first time her daughters had come home from kindergarten with the same felt and cotton ball creation. She could turn the pipe cleaners in her palm and see all the different stick men, cats, or other animals that she loved so much. They had lived here for twenty years with their girls. It was a miracle the house hadn't been covered over twice before with pom-poms, basketball jerseys, theatre programs, ballet slippers, softball gloves, and beauty pageant paraphernalia.

As the last box was loaded into the van, Paul and Martha held on to each other, and with one last look toward the house, Martha began to cry. She looked at the ground so that Paul couldn't see how disappointed she was about moving. He would miss this house too, no doubt about that. Paul had never gone to college, but he had managed to save money selling pest control contracts. He convinced a bank to give him the rest, and opened a business of his own. During

the first twelve years of marriage, Paul did very well with his company. It was one of the best in Atlanta and held it's own against the big national companies. He bought this house to get further away from the robbery and violence that seemed to be taking over the city and moving toward them.

It was a renovated southern estate and was much larger than their house in the neighborhood. The old slaves quarters were still visible down a dirt road from the bedroom window on the top floor. The old man had lived in the quarters long before they moved in. The owners of the house had needed to sell fast, so Paul and Martha were glad to take it from them. The house had held their Birthdays and Easters. It had been the sight of the oldest daughter's wedding. The sounds of Martha's memory echoed through the house, asking her not to leave. No one else would understand what had happened.

Martha devoted her life to her children and the house. She cooked dinner in the large brick kitchen every night, made breakfast there every morning. She kept up the pool out back, so it would be ready when someone wanted to use it. Martha never learned to swim herself. Every day she cleaned the house, making sure there was not a bed left unmade. She had just enough time to get everything finished before picking the kids up from school or going to the grocery. Martha's days were always full. The children, the house, and Paul needed her. She needed to be there for them.

Martha didn't keep up with her friends from the old neighborhood, and she hadn't made any new ones out here. It wasn't that she didn't want them. She told herself that the other women were too far away, and she just didn't have

time. There were three women she had known forever that she was close to, but beyond them, she had left the others behind. Martha had somehow managed to make friends with the man that lived in back. They had been comfortable together for so long that Martha couldn't remember anymore why she went back there the first time. At least twice a week she would walk down the dirt road back to the old slave quarters and the man that lived there. Jack would be sitting there smiling, like he had been waiting for her. He told her stories about the days when there were no paved roads to get back to the place. His favorite story was about the first car that drove through Georgia. She could almost remember it, word for word, whenever she thought about him.

“Martha, you wouldn't believe how excited we all were. The whole town talked about Mr. Ford's automobile for months. Some people thought he might be dealing with the devil to have thought of such a thing. Imagine a buggy that moved by itself, with no horse. Mother got us dressed up in our Sunday clothes to go out and stand by the road. We took our lunch and sat by the side of the road with the rest of the folks. It was like having dinner on the grounds. Nobody minded the dust that swirled around the picnic like a swarm of flies and stuck to our legs, hanging on for life. They had red and green and white balloons, and all these people were just standing around cheering. I remember the sun was starting to sink a little, and there was some chill in the air. It was early in the spring, so the day had been hot. We were still wet with sweat, and that made us a little cold when the wind started up and the sun was leaving. Anyway, there was this big cloud of dust moving quick down the road, then we caught sight of

that automobile. It raced up there going at least twenty miles an hour. We had all been loud and everything, but it suddenly got real quiet. That automobile made the biggest ruckus, and we just sat there with our mouths all wide, watching the dust move on down the road."

She told Jack stories about herself growing up, and her family, but never thought they quite matched his. He had experienced so much more than she had, even though he had never left the area. One Wednesday afternoon, she confessed that she liked to paint.

"Well Martha, I'd like to see one of them if you have one to show."

"Oh no, they're all put away now. I haven't painted in so long they wouldn't even be worth looking at, Mr. Jack." Martha blushed at the thought of someone being interested in her work.

"Tell you what, then. Why don't you paint one for me? I can hang it up at the end of my bed. This old place never had anything on the walls."

"Well, alright then. Maybe I'll paint you. I can see your place from my bedroom window up there, you know. I'll show you what I see."

She heard Paul pull into the driveway, and ran back home to get supper on the table. The kids were at home then, and Martha would never allow dinner to get off schedule.

Martha didn't completely understand why they were selling the house, but it just didn't feel right to keep such a big place with only the two of them. They didn't need the space, and they wanted to be closer to the lake. Paul had retired

and divided the business among his daughters, but it wasn't the money. For forty years he had made sure it would never be the money.

They were moving to a smaller cabin they had owned for ten years. It sat on a hill, overlooking a lake. Each of those ten years it seemed that they spent a little more time at the cabin and less in the big, empty house. The children left home four years apart. The oldest went to Alabama for college, and came back to marry a guy she dated in high school. The next followed the oldest to Alabama, but had not married. She always joked that she wouldn't. The third child never went to college, but started working for her father when she finished high school. The family gathered every Sunday after church for dinner. Martha lived for Sunday. The house was alive again when everyone was there.

She knew they needed her to make everything work. Preparation would begin on Saturday when Martha got out the China and the serving plates. The dining room would be clean and set by ten o'clock. She woke at six on Sunday to put everything together, then put it in the oven for after church. When she heard the cars pulling onto the road, Martha would put everything out on the buffet and rush to meet her family at the door.

The move meant that they had to get rid of all the beautiful things Martha had grown to love. Each daughter was more than happy to adopt something from the home, but there was still a lot left over. The cabin had always been furnished, and was too small to hold much of what was left. Martha was forced to agree to an auction. When everything was sold and they were finally situated

in the cabin, she decided it was time to organize what was left. There was no sense in putting all the old boxes back under new beds. Her first task was the organization of the pictures.

For two days she went through boxes, trying to group the vacation pictures and the family Christmases. The landscapes all went together in their own pile for further investigation. On the second day, she opened a box and found the picture of the man down the road. She sat back and thought about Mr. Jack and the picture.

He had always been old. His skin was so brown and wrinkled over his bones that it looked like it could have never fit tightly. His eyes bulged from their sockets, reminding her of her grandfather. His hair was silver and curled tight against his small skull. Martha remembered his hands. His fingers had been long and thin. His bones were visible just beneath the skin, and across the tops were hairs scattered and curling. Even at the peak of the Atlanta summer he wore long, black pants and a long-sleeved, white cotton shirt buttoned all the way up the front. Mr. Jack had a wide-brimmed black hat that kept the sun from his eyes and the heat in his body. He was born in the little shack surrounded by cotton fields down from the main house. It was no longer a part of the house, and the man who owned the fields let Mr. Jack stay there out of respect. Mr. Jack only left once a week. The church van came by early each Sunday. The Ladies Auxiliary made a special breakfast on Sundays for the elderly of the church. Martha always met the church van when it dropped him off on Sunday afternoon.

"How was the service?"

"Fine, fine. The Lord is alive and well, Martha."

"That's certainly good to hear. I brought some supper."

"Now I told you there was no need in always bringing me things. I can manage on my own."

"And I told you that I want to bring you things."

"Alright then." That big smile spread across his face. Mr. Jack reached out and held her hand in his.

"How is that painting coming?"

"I'm still trying to get to it. So much to do, you know."

This became the routine before Martha walked back up the dirt road and turned to wave before going in.

He was out on his porch rocking every day when the sun came up, and he went inside only to go to bed. Martha watched sometimes from the window. He has never had electricity, and said he never wanted it. The light of a fire in winter, or a candle in the summer did just fine for him. "Besides," he would say, "everyone knows that when it's light outside you should be working. When the sun goes, the good Lord is telling us all that it's time to be in bed." Paul put in a wood stove the winter of the ice storm. He was afraid Mr. Jack might burn down the shack and the fields with the rugged fireplace he had, so he thought the stove might be a little safer. Mr. Jack loved his wood stove. He said it made such a difference at night. He didn't have a lot of family left: just one cousin who rarely

visited. There was never anyone who visited for longer than an hour, and Mr. Jack never stayed a night away from home. That was his home, and even for its shabbiness and bare floors, he loved it. He loved it especially in the summer when the sun rose and cast long lines of light down the wooden floor through the cracks in the wall.

One evening, just at dusk, Mr. Jack sat on his porch. A long silver car slid into the drive. Martha heard music and noticed the headlights. She looked out from her window to see who it was. It wasn't usual for people to call on Mr. Jack this late. He should be going inside soon. The headlights from the car rested on Mr. Jack. The door slammed shut, and a tall man started walking toward him. Mr. Jack raised his arm ward off the light, hoping he could see a face. Two more figures appeared before the light. The three moved in unison toward Mr. Jack. Two of the strangers were on him before he had time to move. They wrapped their belts around him, strapping his arms to the sides of the chair, his feet together at the bottom. One of the men raised a board from his side and let it fall hard on Mr. Jack. With each blow he huddled further into the seat of the rocking chair. Martha yelled from her window, but they only glanced behind them. They did not stop. The man beat him until he no longer struggled under the weight of the board. He was still breathing. Throwing the board aside, the three men turned and walked back to the car. The music had never stopped playing. In one motion, the lights left Mr. Jack and turned back to the dirt road in front of the shack. Martha stumbled around her bedroom for the phone, knocking over the bottles of perfume on the dresser.

The police came up to the house and questioned both Paul and Martha. She told them what she had seen, and asked to be informed should they find anything out. The police didn't contact them again, but Martha found an article in the paper about the murder. It explained that Mr. Jack had money hid back at his place, and three young guys that cleaned the church knew about it. They found out where he lived from a church directory and went that night to get what they could.

Martha could remember talking with Mr. Jack about a week before he died. Her friend Ellen had been taking photography classes and wanted to take pictures of Mr. Jack. The class was working on rural shots. Martha and Ellen spent the afternoon talking and taking pictures.

"Have you painted that picture for me yet?" he asked.

"No, I haven't." Martha pushed the hair from her face. "Tell you what, though, I'll get one of Ellen's pictures and use it as a model. That way I can paint your picture at night when everyone is asleep."

"Well then, that sounds pretty fine to me."

Martha kept the picture on her mirror for a while to inspire her to paint, but eventually stuck it in the box with the rest. She wondered if she could do it now. She hadn't painted in such a long time. She pulled her canvas from the corner where it rested and opened the tack box to look at her paint. Some of the bottles had never been opened, so there was still usable paint inside.

The Drive

Jill wiped the sweat from the back of her neck. She was glad that she had left early so she would be home before it got too hot. She popped in a tape of her dad's last sermon. He was the preacher of Goodtree Baptist Church, and he recorded his sermons each week for his daughter. When she first left for school, the family expected her home every Sunday to attend the sermon. When schoolwork mounted and the gas bill came in, her mother and father decided that it might be wise for her to find a local church. She did, after all, need some kind of local support network. Jill ran to her mailbox each Wednesday in anticipation of the weekly tape. It was her beacon in a world that was becoming dark, cold, and corrupt. Jill had been lucky and not witnessed this corruption first hand, but she knew that it existed. Everyone had told her so. She listened to the tape each night before she went to bed because she believed that it ensured pure thoughts. Her parents told her it was the only way to keep from falling to the corruption that was surely hiding all around her. Jill had memorized the tape by the end of each week. She knew that her parents would quiz her over the content on Saturday when they spoke to her. She hadn't had time to memorize this week's sermon because she had been too busy trying to finish her work so she could go home. She knew the long drive would give her time to memorize just about anything.

Growing up in Goodtree, Tennessee gave Jill ample time to daydream. Playing alone in the yard each afternoon, she came up with about as many ways

to get out of that town as there could be. Her favorite game was movie star. Dressed up in her mother's heels and a princess gown she wore on Halloween, Jill danced around the yard, posing for the photographers and TV men. She proudly announced to her parents one afternoon that she would be going to Hollywood soon, but she would never forget where she came from. She could still see the look in her father's eyes as he stared down at her that day.

"The people in those motion picture shows are all living on the threshold of damnation. They shall die a hot death in that realm for their adulterous sins. No daughter of mine will have anything to do with the likes of those people if she expects to be welcome in my house." Her mother sat looking at her knees, unable to lift her eyes in the direction of her daughter. That very day Jill decided she wanted to be a missionary instead. She would not live in the holds of Satan.

Jill became determined that, like her father, she would show people how to live a good, decent life. She knew that she couldn't be a preacher herself. In places like Goodtree, Tennessee, women never dreamed of being a preacher. They went to missionary school so that they could find a preacher to marry. Jill decided she wanted to actually use her holy talents and become a singing missionary. She had heard that there was a growing need for women to spread the word through song. After the movie star shock wore off, Jill made a second announcement to her parents.

"Momma, Daddy, I know you were upset about me wanting to go to Hollywood and all, so I wanted to tell you that I've made a new decision. I want to sing praises all over the United States of America just like Tammy Faye before

she met Jim.” The look of pride on her parents’ faces was enough to push Jill to finish high school second in her class, so she would be assured of acceptance and a scholarship to the best missionary school of the South.

Jill left Goodtree right out of high school. She had won a scholarship to the Mount of Courage Baptist School for Missionary Development right on the border of Tennessee and South Carolina, and was on her way to the top of her class after one year. Everyone said that it was her “Tammy Faye is Innocent” paper that won the scholarship for her.

About two miles past the Gatlinburg exit, Jill noticed that the traffic in front of her had stopped, so she eased up on the gas and hoped it wouldn’t be long. She didn’t mind waiting. Jill honestly believed that patience was a virtue, and the wait gave her time to think about all the ways she could help others. If that didn’t keep her occupied, she just recited all the verses from her father’s sermon. Jill stared up at the sky and began to make a list out loud.

“Let’s see,” she said. “I could go over to one of those real needy countries and teach in one of the poor schools. I could travel with my brothers and sisters to feed and clothe the needy, build houses in the middle of the hot, sticky desert, travel with the good doctors who help to heal the sick and dying...”

Jill noticed two men walking into the woods beside the car, then walking back out as quickly as they had gone in. “Now what in the world are those men doing going into the woods?” she said out-loud. She kept her eyes to the woods and soon saw another man going in. When he walked out, Jill realized he was

zipping his pants. As the color rose in her face, Jill thought of how nice it must be to feel so close to nature. She had never relieved herself in the woods, and the thought of actually being exposed that way in such a populated place made her more than a little nervous. There was a tap at the window. Her face darkened a shade when she realized someone had been standing so close as she had those thoughts. She rolled down her window for a man in his early forties with graying teeth and thinning hair.

"Uh, hi," Jill said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you. I was just wondering if you had the time. The clock in my car hasn't worked in quite a while, and I have no idea how long I've been sitting here."

"I sure do. It's eleven-forty five, and if you've been sitting here as long as I have, you've been here for about thirty minutes."

"It feels like longer than that, but I'll take your word. I hate this. I should be home by now. At least my wife is with me, though. It must be rough for you, sitting here all alone I mean."

"It isn't so bad. I have the radio, and I always enjoy a little time by myself to think. My name is Jill."

"Hi, Jill, I'm Steve. My wife Tammy is back in the car. I thought I'd walk up a little and see if I can tell what's going on."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Steve."

"Yeah, you too."

Jill watched as Steve walked on in front of her. She wondered if he had ever relieved himself in the woods. A few minutes later, he was standing at the window again.

“Just thought I’d tell you, they were blasting up there and it didn’t go right. There’s a bunch of rock across the road. It looks like it could be a few hours before they have it cleared up.”

“Well, I sure hope nobody was hurt. I guess I’m stuck, though.”

“Yep, we’re stuck. Well listen, I better get back to my wife before she wonders what I’m up to.” Steve turned and walked back toward his car.

Jill thought about how nice Steve was. The way that he reported back to her reminded her of her father. That’s just what he would have done. Nothing seemed to bother Steve. Jill thought he must have learned that patience was truly a virtue as she had. She had noticed other people pacing around their cars and even yelling to the rocks as if they could get up and walk off the road, but not Steve. That’s how her father would have been. You have to make a bad situation better by finding someone you can share with.

Jill finished the tape and got out of the car to stretch. She had been sitting for over an hour now, and she desperately needed to move. She thought about walking up toward the accident, but decided she didn’t want to get in the way. She hadn’t seen any movement anywhere, so she figured it must be the same. She walked back in the direction Steve had gone.

Two cars back, she noticed a Camry like hers, except green. A long hand flew up out of the driver’s window, attracting her attention.

"Oh, hi," Jill said, stopping beside Steve's car.

"Tammy, this is Jill. The lady that gave me the time. Jill, this is my wife Tammy."

"It's very nice to meet you, Jill."

"Nice to meet you, too. I hope I'm not being too personal, but I just love your name. It's the same as my idol's, Tammy Faye Baker."

"My goodness, what a coincidence. You know, I still love Tammy Faye myself. I think everybody was wrong about her. Jim was the bad one. Tammy Faye just got caught up in his sins," Tammy said.

"I completely agree. I wrote my scholarship essay on that very same subject."

"Where do you go to school?"

"Up in South Carolina. Mount of Courage School for Missionary Development."

"No kidding. So, you want to be a missionary."

"With all my heart and soul," said Jill. "My dad says there is nothing better than spreading the word to those less fortunate. He is a preacher."

"Well, I think you'll make a good missionary. That is very honorable of you. Where are you from?"

"Goodtree, Tennessee. My daddy is the preacher of the Goodtree Baptist Church."

"You know," said Tammy, "we are from Evelone County, just down from there. We were looking on the map, and I think that if we go back to exit 42, we

can take the highway on through. It looks like you could go that way, too, then get back on the interstate. It's a little longer, but if we don't move soon, it isn't going to matter anyway. You're welcome to follow."

"Can I see that?" Jill said. Tammy handed the map to Jill through the window. She traced her finger along the highway that ran through the mountains and back to the interstate, verifying what Tammy had told her.

"How long do you think it would take?"

"I'm not completely sure, but it looks like about an hour," Steve said. "We are going to cut across the median and go back. It has to be what these other cars are doing."

"That sounds good to me," Jill said. "Anything is worth a try at this point."

Jill ran back to her car. She fastened her seat belt and turned behind Steve and Tammy across the median. When they got off at the exit, Steve pulled in to a gas station. Jill turned in behind him and noticed the bright yellow sign of a sandwich shop.

"I hope you don't mind, but I thought it would be a good idea to grab a something to eat. I need to fill up my jug, too. My car has a slight tendency to overheat going through the mountains. The pull is a little rough."

Jill shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head in approval. She wanted to get home, but she was hungry. It would also give her a chance to call home.

"I'm just going to use the phone. I'll be there in a minute." She met them at the counter as they were about to order.

"What do you like?" Steve said.

"I think I'm getting a #2. I'm pretty hungry."

"Two #2's and a #4."

"I can get mine. You really don't have to do that," Jill said.

"Look, I made you stop here. It's the least I can do," Steve said.

"I guess." Jill smiled at Steve. He was so nice.

Steve and Tammy sat opposite Jill at the table.

"So was anyone at home?"

"What do you mean?" Jill said.

"Well you used the phone. We just figured you called home."

"Oh, yeah. No, they weren't there. I sure do wish I knew where they were. I don't want them to worry."

"They'll be fine. Anyway, you'll be home soon enough," Steve said. He bent down and took a bite of his sandwich.

"My grandmother lives in Evelone County. Lois Carter," Jill said.

"Lois Carter. That name sounds a little familiar, but I am just so bad with names," Tammy said.

"She volunteers at the Red Cross. She used to be a Math teacher, but now she's too old. She says the kids today just drive her crazy. They don't have the respect they once did."

"Oh, yeah. Lois Carter. She might have taught my boy. How long ago did she retire? Four years now?" Tammy said.

"Just last year." Jill looked up from her sandwich, confused.

"That's right. I was thinking of someone else for a minute there," Tammy said.

"Okay, I'm glad you two are enjoying yourselves, but we need to get back on the road." Steve collected the paper from the table, placed it on the tray, and took the whole mess over to the trashcan. The three made their way back out to the cars.

"I'll make sure I go slow enough so that you can keep up," Steve said.

"Don't worry, I'm as ready to get home as you are."

Jill stared ahead at the license plate of their car and thought about how lucky she was to have met someone so nice. It seemed to Jill that no matter where she went, she was always finding people she was connected to in some way.

The road wound its way through the mountain, and Jill gripped the wheel at every turn. She had told Steve to go as fast as he wanted, but 65 around these turns was a little too wild for her. She flashed her lights on and off, hoping Steve would know that she needed to slow down.

They flew around a sharp curve, and Steve pulled his car onto a lookout point at the side of the road. He got out of his car and walked back to Jill.

"You were flashing your lights. Is there something wrong?"

"I was just having some trouble keeping up. I didn't want to lose you, that's all."

“Sorry. Tammy was complaining, too. Look, my car is running a little hot, and there is a stream down there. I’m going to put some water in my car, then go down and fill up my jug. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all.” Jill saw Tammy climbing over the rail, headed to the stream. “Wait up. I’ll go with you,” she said. Tammy stopped just over the guardrail and waited for Jill. She reached the rail, then climbed over with Tammy. When they reached the bottom, Jill looked up at her car. They were a little further down than it had looked from the road. She could barely see the top of her car. When they neared the bottom, Tammy turned to see if Jill was still close behind.

“I’m going to put my feet in here. I used to love this when I was a little kid.”

“Me, too. I haven’t done this in a long time.”

“This is great. I could stay out here all day,” Tammy said.

The hood of the car made a loud, hollow thump as Steve let it slam closed. Jill turned to see Steve’s figure climbing over the guardrail, then looked back toward the stream. She heard the gravel crunching under his feet as he walked down the hill.

Jill felt something come down hard on the back of her head. She knew she had been hit by something, but she felt that she had heard the dull thud more than felt it. She turned to see Steve’s silhouette again, this time with a glass Yoo Hoo bottle in his hand. He hit her a second time, and she crumpled

over into a ball. She felt her mouth fill up with dirt and sand as she tried to speak.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name." Her eyes filled with hot, salty tears as she tried to finish her prayer. Tammy stared down at Jill as if she were an animal that had just been hit by their car. She stammered something, but Jill was unable to make out exactly what she said.

Tammy reached down in Jill's direction, but Steve grabbed her by the hand and turned to go back up the hill.

"Why did you do that? I thought we said we would let this one go?"

"No, that's what you said. I said that I wanted her. She's too sweet. Too innocent. She'll only hurt us."

"We said we would only hurt the bad ones. Get rid of those who were against us. This one doesn't know enough to be against us." Tammy looked into Steve's eyes. "You are starting to like what we have to do, aren't you."

"It's just part of the call. I don't like it, but I have to do it. Now come on. Let's get in the car."

"She's laying down there bleeding. What if she tells somebody who we are?" Tammy said.

"Nobody will find her before the animals. There was a lot of blood. She won't make it. Can't. She's not strong enough. That's why I had to do it."

Jill lay on the ground, blood mixing with the dirt around her head. She wanted to crawl into the woods and hide, but she was scared that she might not

be able to get out. She kept praying as she lay there. Jill lost all track of how long she might have been there, and she didn't know if she had heard their car pull away, but she knew that she had to do something. She pulled herself off the ground and crawled up the hill.

Their car was gone. She searched as much of her own as she could to see if anything had been taken, then pulled a shirt from her back seat. She held the shirt against her head and drove toward Gatlinburg. She would be at her grandmother's house soon. Her grandmother would take care of her.

Alma Brown

Alma stood on the bottom step to the back door of her parents peeling white farmhouse. She looked out across the fields that they had farmed for years. The same fields her father's father had farmed. She despised the old storage sheds that stood in a row beside the driveway and wished that her parents would tear them down.

"Alma Brown, get in this house. This is the last time I'm calling you, girl. Supper has been ready for ten minutes."

"But Mama, I'm busy. I don't have time to eat."

"You've been out there since sun-up, and you sure haven't helped me or your daddy today. Now I'm not telling you again. Get yourself inside this house."

Alma laid her bag against the wall of the house and turned to take one more look at the cornfield. She remembered the first time she had wanted to play in the rows, but they warned her that it was too dangerous. She was only five and had wanted to play hide and seek. Her parents said she would get lost in there and never find her way out. Alma didn't want to be lost, so she heeded her parent's warning and stayed out of the cornfield until she was old enough to question her parent's rules.

She climbed the concrete steps to the back door of the house and went inside.

"Wash your hands before you sit down. Ain't no telling what you been in

out in that field, but I know I don't need it in my house."

"Yes, ma'am. Where's Dad?"

"He's still washing up from what he's been into. Why don't you go call him in to eat? I swear, between the two of you I'm going to have a nervous breakdown."

Alma and her father walked back into the small kitchen together. Standing side by side, you could tell who Alma got her looks from. She was only a few inches shorter than her father who was 6'4", and she shared his sandy hair, hazel eyes, and deeply tanned skin. There was only one feature that separated Alma from her father. Her hands. Mr. Brown's hands told the story of his life. They were well-used hands with scabs at the knuckles and calluses on the palms. They were wrinkled with age and sun and use. Alma liked the rough feel of her father's hands because they made her safe. Hands that could withstand what his had could surely protect her.

Alma took her usual place in front of the window, and her father sat at his at the head of the table. With her thick fist Mrs. Brown ladled out portions from a pot filled with stew. She then placed a pie tin full of bread in the middle of the laminate table that the Brown's had bought twenty-four years ago when they first set up their home. When she finished serving, she joined the pair in her seat across from their daughter. The end of the table across from her husband was saved for that chance that they might have a visitor drop by in time for supper. In the small town of Macon, Tennessee, that could happen at any time. Alma and her father had already begun to eat when Mrs. Brown took her chair.

“Alma, say the blessing.”

“Ma.”

“Alma, you may not believe it, but Jesus is listening to you complain. Now you just say that prayer like I told you to. Y’all bow your heads.”

“If Jesus is listening to me, then why hasn’t he gotten me away from here like I been asking?”

“Jesus knows what is best for us when we don’t. Now say the prayer.”

“Dear Lord, thank you for this food and each other. I’m still waiting.”

“Thank you, honey. That was very nice. Dad, will you please take that hat off when you’re at the table?”

All three lowered their heads to the bowls of stew before them and started to shovel the lumpy liquid into their mouths. There was no sound but that of the clock in the background between their smacking and slurping. Mr. Brown lifted his bowl from the table, tilted his head back, and scraped the last of the chunks into his mouth. He swept the back of his hand across his chin, using his shirt as a napkin.

“Now Dad, haven’t I told you not to do that? Trying to get those stains out of your shirtsleeves is going to give me a nervous breakdown.”

“I’ll put it on my pants then. They’re darker.” Mr. Brown looked at this wife through the top of his eyes and winked to show that it was meant to be a joke.

“I’ll make you think on your pants. I shouldn’t be having to re-raise you. Your own mother should have done a better job.”

"Yeah," said Mr. Brown, shoving himself back from the table while the legs of the chair made a deeper groove into the wood floor. Alma started to follow her father's lead.

"You just sit right there, young lady. Just because Dad gets up doesn't mean you can go, too. I need some help cleaning up here."

"I have to go now, Ma, but I'll put the dishes up when I get back. Let them dry on the counter. Bye." Alma let the screen door slam behind her before her mother could stop her. She jumped from the top of the back steps to her backpack leaning against the wall. She threw it over her shoulder and ran toward the cornfield without looking back. She knew her mother would not follow.

Alma climbed through the corn stalks in the field. Her steps were sure and precise on the path she had made to the center. Because her parents had impressed on her how dangerous it could be to be lost in a cornfield, she had made her path carefully during daylight hours. When she made it to the clear spot, she slid her backpack from her shoulder and laid it on the ground. For the spell to work, she had to have everything set up, so she could cast it as the sun went down. She pulled out a white sheet, flashlight, and small scroll, all of which were given to her by Miss Mable, the witch lady who lived far back in the woods and who could give a person potions for just about anything. She piled corn shucks on the ground to serve as a pillow. Alma took off her clothes, then wrapped herself in the sheet as she had been instructed. She laid everything out around her, and waited on the sun. As the sun started to set, she unrolled

the scroll and began to read.

“A barnibus ebum. E lovekim bubkim. I wantim seeim. O whisperim his name. U canim callim. Imirim, sprit of the corn, I call you. As I sleep tonight, whisper the name of my beloved through the stalks of your sweet corn. Whisper, Whisper, Whisper. I call you to speak!”

Alma rolled the scroll and placed it under her pillow, then closed her eyes to try to sleep. She wasn't sure how she'd fall asleep so early, but she knew it was important to give the spell as much time as possible to do the trick. Once in the night she woke, sitting up straight in her sheet. She listened intently to the whispering of the corn when the wind blew, but went back to sleep when she was sure it wasn't speaking to her. The sun was coming up when she woke again, and she knew the spell hadn't worked. Alma was sure that she had done something wrong. She let a few tears spill down onto the white sheet, then picked herself up and began to get dressed. If Miss Mable couldn't help her find a man to get her out of Macon, then she's just have to find a way to get out on her own.

Alma opened the screen door slowly, trying not to make any noise, but the hinge let out a loud screech. She should have known it would.

“Alma, is that you?”

Alma didn't answer.

“Dad, did you forget something?” Her mother came through the doorway and saw Alma standing in the kitchen with her backpack.

"Alma Brown, where have you been? Me and Dad have been worried sick to death all night. We've looked everywhere for you."

"Ma, I told you not to worry about me. I had business to take care of."

"What do you mean, 'business to take care of'? I'll make you think business. The only business you had last night was putting away those dishes, which you did not do. Now, tell me where you were all night." Mrs. Brown raised a wooden spoon in the air and started toward Alma.

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you where I was if you promise you won't get mad."

"I'm already mad, so tell me."

"Well, you know how I've been praying real hard for a man? I heard somebody talking about Miss Mable."

"You better not tell me you've been down there talking to that crazy lady. Everybody knows she been messing with the Devil."

"She's not bad, Ma. Anyway, nothing else is working, and I can't just stay here with you and Dad on the farm forever. I done graduated from the high school. If I don't do something, I'm going to die."

"Alma, get up to your room and don't come down until I call for you."

Alma knew it wouldn't help to argue more, so she stomped up the stairs and slammed the door to her bedroom. If her mom was going to keep her shut up in the room, she knew she'd never find a way out of Macon. She had to find a way out of this place where she never had the opportunity to talk with someone her own age. She had to find somewhere that had movie theatres and real restaurants. The only place she'd ever been to eat other than someone's house

was The Dinner Bell. She would find a way out, no matter what it cost her.

Alma heard her dad come in and braced for what he might do, but he never came up the stairs. As the sun got higher in the sky, and she knew it must be close to noon, she began to wonder if they had forgotten about her. She stretched out on her bed with a stack of movie magazines. They were her only windows out of Macon since her parents didn't like for her to watch TV. She was almost asleep when there was a knock on the door.

"I got your dinner out here if you're hungry."

"I don't want any."

"Don't be messing with me anymore. I'm leaving this out here, and it better be gone when I come back."

When she heard her mother's footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs, she opened the door and pulled the plate into her room. She raked the food into the garbage can that sat beside her desk, placed the tray outside the door, and sat back down on the bed. Her mother came back to the door an hour later.

"Alma, come downstairs. Dad wants to talk to you. Pick up your plate and bring it with you."

Alma walked down the stairs and into the kitchen without lifting her head to them and put her dish in the discolored water of the sink. She walked back into the den and sat on the brick hearth with her knees pulled up to her.

"Alma, Mom says you slept out all night with that devil woman." Mr. Brown rubbed the stubble on his chin that he had missed that morning.

"I didn't stay out with her. She just gave me the magic to help me find a

man and get out of here. Dad, you know how important this is. I'm already 17 years old. If I don't do something now, nobody is going to want me. You don't want me living here with you forever, do you?"

"Alma, you know we like having you here with us. And if you want to meet boys your age, you should just get more involved in the church. There are plenty of nice boys in the church." This had been the argument Alma had heard from her mother for a while now.

"I don't want to meet any of the boys there. They just want to stay around here forever. I want to meet men who have dreams just like I do."

"What do you know about dreams, girl?"

"Mom, just because you're happy being a farmer's wife, don't mean I'm going to be. I want to get out and live somewhere. Maybe I want to go to college someday."

"We can't afford to send you to college, Alma. My crops haven't done that well over the past few years. You know I regret that."

"I'm not saying that you have to send me to college, Dad. I'm saying that if I ever want to go, I have to find a way to get there myself."

"This is what's going to happen." Mr. Brown rose from his chair. "You are going to try to make your mama happy by doing what she says. If she wants you to go with her to the church, then you'll go. And I don't want to hear anything else about Miss Mable helping you cast spells."

With that said, Mr. Brown turned and went back out to the fields to finish his work. Alma knew that what her father said was considered to be final. She

didn't ask questions, but started to make plans to get herself off of the farm. She might not be able to find a man to marry her and take her off, so she'd have to do it herself.

Alma spent the rest of the afternoon trying to figure out a good way to get off the farm. She didn't know exactly where her final destination would be, but she knew that she couldn't stand the thought of a life filled with people who she was sure were only interested in judging her. She also knew that working on the farm with her parents wouldn't get her anywhere. Before she could get away, she'd have to find a real job so she could save enough money to buy a car and move out on her own.

The only place Alma knew of that she could get a job was in Springdale, 12 miles away. She had spied an old bike in the barn that she thought she could fix up enough to ride. She wasn't fond of riding, but if she didn't have her parents help, it was the only way out of Madison. There were always farmers along the way taking crops into town, so she was sure she could pick up a ride anytime. She would need the bike though, in case she couldn't find anyone. The hardest part would be convincing her parents that it was a good idea. Alma's mother had had a difficult time in labor with Alma, and she had been told that she could have no more children. When the Browns realized that they would have no male children, they became dependent on Alma to carry on the family farm when they no longer could. Her parents reminded her of this constantly. It was what they expected of her. No matter how many times Alma tried to tell them what she wanted, they insisted the feelings would pass. If she

was going to get away, she had to think of something they would accept.

That evening, the Browns took their usual places around the dinner table. Mrs. Brown had made fried pork chops, corn on the cob, green beans, and cornbread, a meal usually reserved for Sundays. Alma couldn't have put her parents in a better mood if she had planned the evening and cooked the dinner herself. Mr. Brown was the first to begin eating.

"You sure done a good job with dinner tonight," Mr. Brown smiled. "Is this some special occasion I don't know about?"

"I just like to cook for my family because I'm grateful for having y'all around. Is everything all right for you, Alma?"

"Yes, ma'am." Like her father, Alma thought her mother must be up to something. When did she care whether Alma liked dinner or not? It didn't matter, though. Tonight would still have to be the night she broke the news to her parents.

"Good, then. Y'all eat up. I've got a cobbler in the oven for us."

Mr. Brown started with the corn, his favorite. Mrs. Brown watched her husband with butter around his mouth and kernels at the corners. Alma noticed how pleased her mother seemed that she could make her husband so content with something as simple as food. Alma didn't understand how this sitting around the table with corn and pork chops was enough for her mother. She watched the two for a sign of what would take place. She couldn't imagine what had caused this change to come over her mother. This morning she had been furious with Alma, and now she sat at the table smiling. Deciding that she

couldn't wait any longer, Alma went ahead with her own news.

"I've got something to tell y'all." Alma looked directly at her parents. "I've decided to get to work."

"That's great news. I can really use the help around here with things getting so far behind." Mr. Brown smiled at his daughter.

"That's not really what I mean, Dad. I want to get a job in Springdale."

"Alma, your father is planning on you helping him out, so you can learn the business. You know that everything we have is yours."

"I know, mama, but that's not really what I want to do. I was thinking I'd get a job, so I can save some money of my own. I want to start my own life."

"I want, I want. What do you mean? I have worked day and night on this farm to make a place for you and your mama. So you can have something when we ain't here to take care of you anymore. If you need some money, just ask me. We can work all that out."

"I don't want to always have to depend on your money, Dad. I want to take care of myself."

"You've never taken care of yourself. You don't even help me cook. How do you think you're just going to start now? You need me and your daddy."

"I do need y'all, mama, but I need to do something for myself, too."

"What kind of a job do you think you can do? You've never done anything but lived here with me and your mama. Who's going to hire you?"

"I know how to do things. I worked on the yearbook at school. I can file and type and even take pictures."

"If you do get a job, how do you think you're going to get there? I hope you don't think you're going to take my truck anywhere. I need it here for the farm."

"I found an old bike in the barn. I was thinking I could ride that into town if I couldn't hitch a ride."

"No daughter of mine..."

Mrs. Brown stood from her chair. "Dad, Alma, can we please not fight over this anymore. You're ruining my dinner. "

"I just want y'all to understand."

"I understand that you want to break your mama's heart."

"Dad, can't we discuss this after supper?"

"Fine. But I ain't finished with this yet."

With that said, they looked down to the food that sat cold on their plates.

When dinner was over and the dishes had been finished, Mrs. Brown got the dessert plates from the cabinet for the cobbler.

"Why don't we all sit together in the living room? I can make some coffee for you Dad, and Alma, there's milk in there if you want it with your cobbler."

"I don't want any. I'm just going up to my room. I'll see y'all in the morning." Alma had made it to the fourth stair when her father spoke.

"Alma, stay down here. We're going to talk about this business of you working in town. I would like some coffee." Mr. Brown looked over his shoulder at his wife who was still standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

Alma took a few steps back before turning completely to face her father. When she did, she only saw the back of his head. He would make her go completely into the living room. There would be no hiding on the dimly lit stairs. Alma walked around the couch and sat on the hearth. The bricks were cold and hard, and Alma knew that she would sit up straight on the unforgiving surface. If she had known how small and childlike she looked to her father there, she would have moved. Mrs. Brown came into the room with an old aluminum tray that held three portions of cobbler, two cups of coffee, and a glass of milk. She set them on the old coffee table, then began to serve her family. When Mr. Brown got his, he immediately put the plate to the side, but took a sip of the coffee.

“Alma, me and your mama don’t want you walking into town to go work somewhere. Those people out there don’t care about you. They’ll just get rid of you if somebody better comes along. Me and your mom are going to treat you right. We’re going to give you everything we have.”

“Dad, don’t you see, that’s not what I want. I want to see what I can make of myself. You and mama have done for me long enough.”

“We just don’t approve of you being out all the time alone. There are people out there you just can’t trust.”

“I know there are bad people. After all, Dad, you and Mama taught me everything I need to know.” Alma knew that her father wasn’t giving in easily, but arguing wasn’t going to help. She had to use more than arguing to get what she wanted and have their blessing on the whole thing.

“Just when were you planning to go out and look for this job?”

"In the morning."

"In the morning, huh?" Mr. Brown looked down into his coffee cup. He didn't say anything for at least a full minute. He looked over to Mrs. Brown, then back to Alma.

"We're going to talk about this. We'll tell you our decision in the morning. You'll just have to wait until then to make plans."

"Yes, sir." Alma stood to go up to her room. She paused for a moment, then went over to kiss her mother good night. Before leaning over to kiss her father's cheek, she looked right into his eyes to let him know that she meant every word she was saying, and this was important to her.

Alma walked to the top of the stairs, but she waited before going into her room. She wanted to hear what her parents would say to each other.

"Why did you tell her we'd talk about this? You aren't really thinking about helping her find a job in Springdale are you?" Mrs. Brown was upset.

"No, I'm not. We've got to show her that it ain't right for her, though, or she'll just keep right on, determined she's going to go. We have to make her think she's earning her way around here. You know how strong-headed she can be."

"Just what do you think we can do to keep her here?"

"For starters, we ain't helping her get into town. If I know Alma, riding that bike won't last long. She'll be staying here on the farm and happy to do it before you know it." Mr. Brown stood from his chair.

"I hope you're right."

"I am right. Now come on to bed."

Alma waited until the light went out in the living room before she moved. She didn't want her parents to know that she had been listening from the top of the stairs. She was furious, but she didn't want to waste any more time fighting. If she didn't have their support, she would do it on her own.

Alma woke to the sound of pans being knocked around and the smell of bacon. She rolled over and looked out of her window. The sky was dark and rolling, and she could hear the low sound of thunder in the distance. She wouldn't let the weather bother her today, though. It wasn't uncommon for it to storm one minute, then the sun pop out the next. Alma just hoped that today would be one of those days. She climbed from the bed and pulled on the robe she had gotten for graduation, dreading going downstairs to hear her parents give her all the reasons she shouldn't look for a job in town.

No one spoke during breakfast. Alma knew what her parents were thinking, but she didn't want to bring it up. She would make them take that step. She had made it through the meal and was ready to retreat back to her bedroom to wait out the rain.

"May I be excused?"

"We want to talk to you about going to work."

"Okay."

"Your mama and I discussed everything last night, and we just can't let you do it. We'll pay you an allowance for the work you do here, so you have

your own money for things. How's that?"

"No, Dad. That's not enough. I would still be living off of you and mama. I want to find things I like to do. Can't you see that?"

"Well, you said so last night. You're almost 18, so I don't see how we can stop you from doing what you'll do. I'll tell you one thing, though. If you get out there and find out that it's not what you thought it would be, you better find somewhere else to go. If you disobey us, you can't come back into our house."

"Dad, I just want to get out on my own. I don't want to lose you and mama. I'm not trying to make you mad." Alma swallowed the tears that were building. She knew her parents didn't like the idea, but she hadn't known that they would never let her come back home.

"I've told you what I think. The decision is yours." Mr. Brown pushed away from the table and went outside.

Alma looked over at her mother for some sign that this was a joke, but her mother looked down at the table.

"You mean, if I don't work here on the farm and do the things you want me to do, then you just don't want me?"

"It's not that we don't want you, Alma, but your daddy ain't going to have no child of his going against his word, then coming around and rubbing it in his face."

"Is that how you feel, too?"

"He's my husband. I support what he says."

"May I go up to my room now?"

"After you help me with the dishes."

Alma cleared the table, putting any leftover food in a pan on the oven. After her mother washed the dishes, Alma dried them and put them away. She didn't say a word to her mother while they worked side by side in the kitchen. When she was finished with her part of the work, she hung her towel on a bar beside the stove and went up to her room.

Since she had never known anyone who had gotten a job in town before, she wasn't sure where to start. She had seen signs in some of the windows in town that said "Help Wanted," so she decided that she would try those places first. It would at least be a start. From her window she could see that the rain would move through quickly, and it would likely be a hot day.

She took a longer shower than usual because she was thinking about all the things she could do when she got off the farm. It wasn't until the water began to get cold that she realized that she hadn't even gotten her hair completely wet. She stuck her head under the rapidly cooling water and washed it as quickly as she could. The rinsing was the worst part. The water had gone completely cold, and it made Alma shiver when it touched her shoulders. She stepped from the shower, dried herself off, and went back to her room in search of the perfect clothes to wear.

Finding a job was new to Alma, but she wanted to look like she was dependable and hard working. She took her new cotton dress her mother had gotten her for graduation from her closet. It had stopped raining, so she would be able to wear the new shoes with it, too. When she had checked herself over

several times and knew she was ready, she looked over at the clock. It was 10:00 a.m. Her father was in the back fields, and her mother should be in the basement doing laundry. She should be able to get down the stairs and on the road without anyone noticing.

As she road the bike toward town, she began to get nervous. She tried not to pedal too fast because she didn't want to look sweaty or dirty when she got into town. With each barn that she passed the hunger in Alma for life off the farm grew until she thought it might explode inside her. That growing hunger and her nervousness made the twelve mile ride seem like twelve hundred, but the square finally came into sight.

When she got to the square, she got off of her bike and pushed it into one of the bike slots. She wiped her forehead and straightened her dress, then looked over the places on the square and tried to decide where to go first. The most obvious place was the Dinner Bell, the only place on the square to eat. It was one of the only restaurants the farm families went to. She couldn't imagine leaving her mother's kitchen just to go work in someone else's, though, so she chose The Dress Shop run by Miss Nancy. Because Alma had been refusing to go to church, she hadn't seen Miss Nancy in years. But she knew that Miss Nancy was fond of her parents. She had been fond of her once, but Alma didn't think she would be as kind since she'd stop attending church. She might not understand that Alma felt like the people in church were only interested in judging her. Alma took a deep breath and headed for the shop.

When she walked through the front door, the little bell over the door chimed to announce her entrance. She looked around but didn't see anyone. She walked over to a rack of dresses and fingered the soft fabric.

"May I help you?"

Alma was startled by the voice from the back of the store. "Yes, ma'am. Miss Nancy?"

"That's right. Is there something I can help you with?" Miss Nancy looked at Alma's hand that still held on to the dress.

Alma dropped the fabric. "I was wondering if you need any help around the store. I can help you do alterations, talk to customers, clean up for you; anything you want."

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name."

"Alma. Alma Brown. You probably know my parents from First Baptist."

"Oh, yes. Alma Brown. Why are you looking for a job, dear? Don't your parents own a farm?"

"Yes, ma'am, they do. But I don't want to stay on the farm. I graduated from the high school, and now I'm ready to work someplace else. I want to make it on my own."

"You do, huh? You said you could sew for me. Have you ever done any alterations?"

"Not exactly for other people."

"What have you sewn before?"

"Nothing, actually. I've seen mama do it, though. I help her thread the

needle sometimes when her eyes aren't working so good."

"My eyes are working perfectly well. I don't need anyone to thread for me."

"I can clean real good. I've been helping mama do that for a long time."

"I already have someone who cleans the place. I'm afraid I don't have anything for you to do. I'm sorry. Good luck, though. You'll find something."

Miss Nancy turned and disappeared into the back again, leaving Alma alone in the store. This was going to be even more difficult than Alma had first thought.

With The Dress Shop behind her, Alma decided to head for the newspaper. That's where she really wanted to work anyway. She knew how to use the camera, and everyone said she was a good writer. Besides that, the life of a reporter was so glamorous. It would take her to all sorts of new places. She looked over at the clock above the funeral home. She had wasted a whole fifteen minutes with Miss Nancy, and she wasn't any better off.

Alma paused before opening the door of the newspaper. She ran her hands over her hair to make sure it was all still in place and brushed at her dress to remove any wrinkles that had gathered. She squeezed her eyes shut then opened them again, hoping to make her vision extra clear. She opened the door to the newspaper and saw a small lobby that held a single desk with a lady sitting behind it.

"May I help you?"

"Yes. I was wondering if you might be looking for help."

"As in a job?"

"Yes. That's what I was thinking."

"No. We don't have any job openings right now."

"Don't you need to look or ask someone? With a place as big as this, there must be something I can do. I can write real nice, and I take good pictures, too."

"I am quite sure that there are no jobs available in writing or photography. You can fill out an application and we'll keep it on file for six months."

"That won't work. I need to find a job today."

"There's a job board down that hallway. All jobs in Springdale are listed there. Why don't you go take a look?"

"Thanks. That would be great." Alma walked down the hall the woman had indicated. All along the wall toward the back was a corkboard where five sheets of paper were stapled. Alma was disappointed that there were so few. After all the arguing and then leaving without telling anyone, she couldn't stand to go home without some hope of a job. They would use that to keep her on the farm. She walked to the first one and read.

Wanted: Strong men to work in fields.

Must be able to lift and throw up to 50 lbs.

Alma rolled her eyes. She wasn't a man, and she sure couldn't lift 50 pounds, much less throw it anywhere. She glanced over the next two that had similar requirements, but she slowed down when she came to the fourth.

Full time receptionist needed. Must be friendly, responsible, and able to console individuals in their time of grief. Responsibilities include taking

emergency phone calls from those in need of a hearse and assisting in the preparation of ceremonies to honor the dearly departed. Hours are from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Room and board provided. Must be willing to reside in apartment attached to funeral home. Come to Wells and Sons on the square to apply.

Alma tore the sheet of paper from the board. This was the job she was looking for. Room and board provided meant that she'd get away from home now, without having to save the money.

She walked back out through the lobby of the newspaper more confident than ever. The woman waved from behind her desk, barely looking up from what she was reading.

"I found what I was looking for."

"Good luck, hon."

Alma marched through the middle of the square, ignoring the traffic that was circling through. When she got to the door of the Wells and Sons Funeral Home, she didn't pause as she had before, or even think about what she would say. She just pulled the door open and walked inside like she had been going in there all of her life.

It was darker inside than she had expected. Though she couldn't see very well, Alma looked around for an office. On both sides of the main entry were tall-ceilinged sitting rooms. The walls were paneled halfway up with built-in bookcases and big chandeliers. Alma also noticed the heavy wooden doors that slid back into the wall when they were opened. But there was no sign of anyone

in the front part of the funeral home. Alma began to walk down the hall leading to the back when she heard footsteps on the stairs to the right. She stepped closer, leaned on the railing that ran to the second floor, and called out to the creaking wood.

"Hello. Is anyone there?"

"May I help you with something?" A man spoke from behind her.

Alma whirled around on her heels to find herself looking face to face with a man who was only a few years older than she was, even though his voice had suggested more.

"Mr. Wells?"

"Yes. Actually Mr. Wells, Jr. Is there something I can assist you with?"

"Full time Receptionist. I'm here to apply for the job of Receptionist."

"Do you have any experience?"

"No, sir, but I can do it. I'm really good at talking with people when things aren't going too well. Everyone tells me I have a special gift that way." Alma didn't know where that last part came from. No one had ever told her anything like that. Mr. Wells, Jr. looked pleased though, so she wasn't so ashamed of her lie.

"My father is the one you'll need to convince. He's upstairs now, but I can get him if you like. Your name?"

"Alma. Alma Brown."

"Wait here. I'll be right back down."

As Alma watched him go up the stairs, she heard the big grandfather

clock in one of the sitting rooms strike two o'clock. She knew her parents were worried by now. She wondered where they thought she had gone. They probably thought she had gone to Miss Mable again. She began to look further down the hall, her eyes now well adjusted to the light. Previous experience told her she'd be able to hear someone walking across those creaking boards. Behind the stairwell was another high-ceilinged dining room with a massive cherry dining set. It was more elegant than anything Alma had ever seen. She wanted to run her hands over the dark wood. This was nothing like the old kitchenette her parents had at home. There were no grooves in this floor from chairs slid heavily across the surface. She could only imagine what it must be like to sit at this table with a family of her own. A family that did not make a living on the farm. A matching cupboard stood against one wall with a fireplace on the opposite end. Alma closed her eyes and breathed deeply the smell of the wood and the years of life that had gone on inside these walls. Standing in this room, it was hard to imagine that this home was now a place to mourn those who were lost. There was another heavy wooden door leading to another room, but before Alma could discover what was there, she heard the echo of a man's heavy step on the stairs. She walked back to the hall in time for Mr. Wells, Sr. to reach the bottom.

"Miss Brown, is it?"

"Yes, sir. Alma. I'm here about the job you have advertised. I'm really good at talking to people, and I know I can do a good job."

"Are you any relation to Ernest Brown?"

"Yes, sir. He's my dad."

"And how are your folks now? Still working that land of theirs?"

"I don't suppose they'll ever leave it."

"And what about you, Miss Brown? Not working on the farm with them?"

"It's not what I want to do. That's why I'm here. I want to work here. At the funeral home."

"Oh yes, yes. I'm sorry. Do you have any experience working with people?"

"Well, not exactly. I've never really worked anywhere. If you'll just give me a try, I promise I won't let you down." Alma watched Mr. Wells scratch the top of his head as he thought about the proposition.

"Okay, Miss Brown, I'll give you the job. See how you do. To be honest, you're the first serious inquiry we've had. Your father approves of you getting a job, does he?"

"He knows I want to work off of the farm." It wasn't actually a lie. Her father knew she didn't want to stay on the farm.

"Okay, then. The job is yours."

"When can I start?"

"How about tomorrow evening?"

"Tomorrow? That's just perfect."

"Fine, then. The position requires that you stay here in the apartment. I'll expect you to be here from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m."

"Yes, sir. I read the advertisement. I'll be here at 8:00 p.m. sharp." Alma

almost ran out of the funeral home. She was excited about the new job, but she didn't know what she was going to tell her parents. Alma walked back to her bike feeling strong and alive. That feeling began to fade when she rounded the corner onto Main Street.

Her father's blue truck sat on the side of the road. They were waiting for her.

"Get in the truck, Alma." Mr. Brown held the passenger door open.

"I have my bike."

"Give it to me. We can put it in the back."

Alma handed her bike over to her father who swung it into the back. She climbed into the passenger side next to her mother who slid over closer to Mr. Brown. Alma was relieved that no one spoke on the ride home. She was trying to think of how she could break it to her parents that she had not only accepted a job, but she would have to stay there overnight. As they drove past the businesses that marked Springdale and the fields and farmhouses again came into sight, Alma began to feel small again. She was afraid of how her parents were going to react. She was afraid they would make her feel like a child. The truck pulled into the driveway, and they all tumbled out and made their way into the house.

"Alma, come on in and sit down. We want to talk to you." Mr. Brown seated himself in his chair.

"Dad, I can explain what I did."

"We're listening."

"I knew that you and mama weren't going to let me go, so I left this morning to try to find a job. And I did. I found a really good job. I'm the new receptionist at Wells and Sons Funeral Home."

"Oh, Dad. I can't let my daughter work in a funeral home. That's no place for a young girl." Mrs. Brown threw her hands up around her face.

"Alma, when you left this morning, we were very upset with you. You disobeyed us, and you snuck out of the house without telling us where you were going."

"I know, and I'm sorry. It's just that you weren't going to let me go."

"Let me finish, Alma. While you were gone, your mama and I realized that this must be pretty important if you were willing to leave that way. We didn't expect you to go through with it. And we can remember when we graduated and wanted to get out on our own. What I'm trying to say, Alma, is that if you want to take this job, you have our blessing."

"Thank you, Dad. I promise, I won't let you down." Alma jumped from where she was and hugged first her dad, then her mother. She ran up the stairs to get ready for her new job. Since she would be living at the funeral home, she'd have to pack for at least a week.

"Alma, come on. We're going to be late." Her dad called from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm coming. I just need to get my bag." Alma came down the stairs with bags in hand.

Mr. Brown picked up the heaviest bag and walked out the back door, kissing his wife as he left.

“Thanks for understanding, Mama. I’ll be back home on the weekends.”

Alma kissed her mother and joined her father in the truck. She was ready for this new life.

All In A Name

Ruby and Shelby sat at the table eating Frosted Flakes. They could hear their parents, who were obviously upset over something, in the next room. When Ruby finished her cereal, she drank the milk from the bowl, then put it in the sink. She tiptoed over to the doorway of the living room, so she could figure out what was going on.

"I just don't want to hear about it anymore," Will said. "He's never around. He doesn't do anything for them. He doesn't even call unless he's drunk. Why don't you just give up on this child support thing?"

"Because, Will, he owes us the money. He's never paid for anything, and after all he did, I want him to pay."

"How long has this been going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly long has it been since he's paid child support?"

"Two years."

"Why now? Why the need to take him to court now?"

"You know I've been trying to take him to court, but it's taken this long for it to go through the system."

"When's the last time he saw them?"

"It's been years. He hasn't seen them in years."

"Do you honestly want that man around your little girls? He almost killed all of you. He ran off with other women. What is it going to take for you to just

give up on him?"

"I don't want him around us. I just want him to pay what he's supposed to pay. He owes us. Especially after all he put us through."

"What if I adopted them? If I adopt Ruby and Shelby, then they're mine. They're my responsibility, and we don't have to worry about him anymore."

"I don't want you to adopt them just because you want him to go away."

"That's not what I'm doing. Don't I take care of them? Haven't I always taken care of them? I love them. I've always thought of them as my own, and I don't want him to be able to come back and take them from me if anything happens to you. I want to give them my name. I want us all to be a family in every sense of the word. I've told you I wanted to adopt them before."

Shelby shuffled up behind Ruby.

"What's going on? Are mom and dad fighting?"

"No, Shelby. They're just talking about something." Ruby wanted to protect her little sister from everything. "Besides, you shouldn't be eavesdropping."

"You're eavesdropping." Shelby's face became a pout.

"It's eavesdropping, and I am not. I just don't want to go in while they're talking."

"What's adopt mean?"

"Shelby, just go eat your cereal."

"I'm finished with my cereal. Tell me what that means."

"What exactly did you hear?" Ruby didn't want to tell her sister any more

than she had to.

"Dad said he wants to adopt us. What does that mean?"

"It means that we'll be Sullivans like Mom and Dad. We'll all be a family."

"We're already a family." Shelby didn't understand.

"This would be better, though."

"How would it be better?"

"Just be quiet for a minute, will you? I'm trying to see what's going on."

With Shelby quiet, Ruby could again hear what her parents were saying in the next room.

"Do you really want to adopt them?" Beth sounded both confused and relieved.

"Yes, I do. I want them to really be mine." Will's voice was calm and sure.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time, but I didn't know what to say to make you see that I'm serious. I didn't know what you'd think with all of this child support stuff going on. I know how strongly you feel about making him pay, but I'm tired of it. I want to take care of them."

Before Ruby knew what had happened, Shelby had passed her and was going into the living room.

"Am I going to be a Sullivan?" Shelby asked Beth.

"Ruby, can you come in here please? Were you and your sister listening to us in there?" Will knelt down and positioned himself, so Shelby was trapped between him and Beth.

"Yes, sir." Ruby looked down at the chipped pink polish on her toes.

"You know better than to eavesdrop, Ruby." Beth turned back to face her other daughter. "And Shelby, we don't know yet. Will and I are talking about something very important."

"I just wanted to tell you that I think I'd like being a Sullivan." Shelby pushed from her parent's grip and turned to face them.

"That's wonderful, sweetie. It makes what we're talking about a little easier. Now, if you'll just let us finish talking, we'll come talk to you about it. Is that fair?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You and Ruby go up to your room like your mom asked. We'll come talk to you in a little while." Will turned Ruby and Shelby toward the stairs.

Ruby followed Shelby up the stairs to their room and closed the door.

"That's just great. Now they're mad, and we still don't know what's going on."

"It's not my fault." Shelby threw herself on her beanbag and turned on the TV.

"Turn that thing down."

Ruby was glad that Will wanted to adopt her and her sister. She didn't really know Robert Gurley, but she didn't like what she knew. He drank a lot of beer, and he only called her when he had had too much. Her father said the same thing over and over on the phone. And he had always been mean to them. Deep down, Ruby was afraid Robert would hurt Shelby if he ever had the

chance. She didn't want to think about him anymore, so she went to her bookcase against the wall to try to find something that she hadn't read before. Shelby was watching Bugs Bunny, so she wouldn't be bothering her again soon.

Whenever anything went wrong, Ruby went to her books. She could lose herself in books so easily. She pulled The Outsiders, her favorite book, from the shelf. It was one that she could always count on when she wanted to escape to another place. In the sixth grade she wrote an essay on The Outsiders, and it was selected as one of the best in the whole school. She got to write a letter and send it, along with her essay, to S. E. Hinton, the author. She was still waiting for a reply, but she was sure she would get one. The teacher told her that Ms. Hinton was a busy writer, but she'd get around to it soon.

Ruby stretched out on her stomach and opened the book. She flipped through to some of her favorite parts and read them again. Ponyboy was her favorite character in the book. Even though he was a greaser, Ruby knew he was good. She didn't want him to run away, but she thought it was exciting that he had. Her most favorite part was when he saved the little kids in the church. He was real brave. She closed her eyes to picture Ponyboy there in the burning church and fell asleep on the bed. She didn't wake up until she heard a knock on the door. Her mother stepped into the room.

"Ruby, Shelby, can I talk to you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Where's dad?" Ruby looked up at her mother.

"Shelby, can we turn that off, please?"

"Yes, ma'am." Shelby turned the TV off and joined her sister on the bed.

"Will is downstairs. Are you reading The Outsiders again, Ruby?"

"Just my favorite parts." Ruby knew that her mother didn't understand why she read the same books over and over.

"Shelby, tell me what you know about being adopted."

"Ruby said that we'd get to be Sullivans, and nobody could ever take us away."

"That's a good definition. You know that we love you very much. Dad loves you both very much. That's why he wants to adopt you. It means that if anything ever happens to me, Dad gets to take care of you and Ruby."

"Who would get me now?" Shelby asked.

"Robert would. If he wanted to."

"I would never go with him, Mom. He's too mean. We could go stay with Grandma." Ruby couldn't believe that her father would even think about taking them.

"I know. Will doesn't want you two to have to go with him, either. He wants to give you both his last name, so we'll all be a family."

"Robert wouldn't know how to take care of us. Who would let him have us?" Shelby narrowed her eyes when she didn't understand something.

"Legally, Robert would take care of you if I couldn't anymore. But we don't want that to happen, so Will wants to adopt you. Do you understand?"

Beth tried to explain to her daughter.

"I think so. It's all in the name, right? Whoever's name I have is my dad."

Shelby said

"According to the law, that's right. What do you think? What do you want to do?"

"I want to be a Sullivan, then." Shelby was quick to answer.

"Ruby, what about you?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's what I want, too. What do we have to do?"

"Hopefully, you won't have to do anything. Your dad and me will worry about everything, as long as it's what you both want."

"Yes, ma'am, that's what I want." Ruby jumped to her mother and hugged her. Shelby followed her lead. "Me, too."

"Okay, then. How about going outside to play for a while. We'll have lunch in a few hours."

"If it's okay, I think I'll stay up here and read."

Shelby skipped out into the hall. Mrs. Sullivan closed the door and left Ruby alone in the room.

Ruby was sitting at her desk doing her homework, and she caught herself writing Ruby Sullivan over and over on the lines of her paper. It had been months since anyone had mentioned the argument or changing her last name, and she was becoming more and more curious with each day. She was still a little nervous about it all, but she wanted more answers than she had been given. She wanted to know how someone went about changing her last name. If her parents wouldn't hurry up and do it, then she would. She couldn't concentrate on her homework anymore, so she started to think of a way to bring

up the subject. It would be the perfect night because every Sunday night her parents watched 60 Minutes on TV together.

Ruby walked down the stairs and took a deep breath before going into the living room. Her mother and father were on the couch, and Shelby sat on the floor across the room with a coloring book.

"Mom. Dad."

"Ruby, what are you doing down here? Have you finished your homework so fast?" Dad was always worried about her homework.

"Yes, sir. I wanted to talk to you and Mom." Ruby lied about her homework without even realizing it.

"Come on in here and sit down. What's going on?" Will made room on the couch and motioned for Ruby to come over.

"Mom said that you were going to make me and Shelby Sullivans."

"That's what we want. Is there something wrong?"

"I want to be a Sullivan, Dad, but I was just wondering what was taking so long."

"There's a lot that we have to do to make that happen," Beth answered.

"But we're still working on it. As a matter of fact, I heard from our lawyer today. Mr. Jones says it shouldn't be much longer. The court had to send your father a letter telling him what we wanted to do. He has a certain amount of time to respond to the letter, and so far, he hasn't."

"What does that mean, Mom?" Ruby wanted more than her mother had given her.

"It means that if he doesn't respond to the letter, then we talk to the judge, and he approves it. Easy as that."

"What happens if he responds to the letter? What can he say?"

"He could say that he doesn't want Will to adopt you and Shelby, but I don't think he'll do that."

"Can he stop us?" Ruby asked.

"I don't think so, Ruby. It looks like this is all going to work out the way we want it," Will said.

Ruby leaned into her dad, and he squeezed her so tight she almost couldn't breathe. He didn't talk as much as her mom, but she had gotten used to that. Whenever a question was asked, her mother provided the answer. Dad didn't seem to mind, though. He liked it that way. She could tell by the way he held her that giving her and her sister his last name was what he really wanted. Finally, she wouldn't have to pretend that Robert didn't exist. When she became a Sullivan, she could wipe him away forever.

"Thanks. I just wanted to know. I think I'll go up and get ready for bed."

"And I think this little one should go, too." Beth pulled Shelby away from the coloring book she had been attached to.

"Go on up and brush your teeth. We'll be up in a minute to tuck you in."

"Yes, ma'am." Ruby took her sister's hand and led her up the stairs.

She felt lighter walking up the stairs than she had going down. She was glad to know that she wouldn't have to try to change both her name and her sister's on her own. It was scary, but she would have done it if she had to. It

made her a little sad that Robert Gurley hadn't cared enough to fight to keep them, but it was okay. It had been so long since she'd seen him that she didn't have a clear enough picture of him, anyway. She remembered a short man with a beard. His hair was the brown that appeared to change to red in the sun. It was funny, though. She couldn't remember his eyes. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't. His hands she remembered. They were short like him. He wasn't anything like Will. Will was tall and thin. His hair was dark with enough gray to make him look smart. She could remember seeing him hold an entire basketball in one hand. When she tried to copy she found that she had to use both hands. His arms were long too. He could wrap them completely around her and make her feel safe from everything. If Robert Gurley didn't fight, he couldn't win. And that was just fine with Ruby.

The next afternoon when Ruby came home from school, her mom and dad were waiting on the porch, and Shelby was nowhere in sight. They never waited for her like that. Her dad should have been at work. Ruby knew something important had happened. The last time they had been there waiting for her, it was to tell her that her grandfather had died. She wanted to turn and get back on the bus. Let it take her to someone else's house where no one was waiting on the porch.

"Hi, mom. Dad. Where's Shelby?" Ruby hoped that she could make it go away by pretending that nothing was wrong.

"She's playing next door. We need to talk to you. Come on in and put

your things away." Her mother had been crying.

"What's going on?"

"Just come on in. We need to talk to you." Will led them all into the house.

"Yes, sir." Ruby walked into the door with her parents following behind her. Will had put his arm around her mother like he was trying to hold her up. Ruby put her book bag on the floor and walked over to sit on the couch. Her parents sat on the love seat across from her. She noticed that a string from the woven sofa had come loose and began to play with it.

"We have some bad news. Robert has decided that he wants to fight us. He doesn't want Will to adopt you and Shelby."

"What did he say, Mom?"

"We didn't talk to him, so I don't know for sure. Mr. Jones called us today and said that Robert has hired a lawyer. His lawyer called Mr. Jones and said that Robert wouldn't give y'all up."

"But, he doesn't call us or come see us or anything. Shelby doesn't even know him. I don't understand."

"We told you that technically he was still your father. He said that he doesn't want to give that up. He's accusing me of not allowing him to see you. He says that the reason he doesn't call is that I won't let him talk to you."

"But, you have. Whenever he used to call, you always said it was up to me to talk to him. I did sometimes. I just don't like all the stuff he says when he calls."

"I know you don't, and it's okay that you didn't always talk to him," Beth said. "Right now we just have to work on getting him to drop this, and that's not going to be easy. We're going to have to ask you to do something that we didn't want you to do."

"I'll do anything. What do I have to do?"

"The judge wants you to testify in court."

"In front of a jury?"

"There's no jury in a case like this, but you would have to sit by the judge, and the other lawyer would be able to ask you questions. Robert would be there, too. We hope that won't happen. Will and I are trying to convince the judge that because of your age you should be able to give your testimony in the judge's chambers." Beth didn't know how Ruby would take the news.

"I don't care, mom. I'll tell anybody that I want to be a Sullivan. Even Robert."

"We understand that, but lawyers aren't always nice," Will said. "We don't want to put you through what they might say."

"They can be mean if they want. I'll still tell them the same thing."

"Ruby, we know that you're determined to make this happen, and that makes us very happy. But we're still going to fight back. He can't do this."

"But I'm ready if I have to. What about Shelby?" Ruby couldn't imagine her baby sister in a courtroom.

"Since she's only six, they're much basing everything on what we tell them and your testimony."

"So, I'll do it for all of us."

Ruby sat alone in the leather chair. She looked around at the books in the judge's chamber, wanting to touch them. She had never known anyone who had so many beautiful large books of his own. Ruby had never met this judge, but she thought that he must be a good man to have so many books. That and the dish of candy perched on the edge of his desk put her at ease until she heard the huge door opening behind her. Even though her mother had assured her that everything would be okay, and the lawyer talked to her about what kinds of questions she could expect, she couldn't help but be nervous at the thought of telling the judge everything.

"Good morning, Ruby. I'm Judge Banks." The judge reached down to shake Ruby's hand.

"Good morning, sir." Ruby wanted to be sure that she was as polite as she could be.

"Your mother has explained that we need to talk to you about a few things, hasn't she?"

"Yes, sir. Where is my mom?"

"She has to wait outside while I ask you some questions. You'll be able to see her in a little while. Why don't we start by getting to know each other? Does that sound okay to you?" Judge Banks walked around his desk, took a note pad from the shelf, and sat down.

"Okay." Ruby didn't like the way the judge was talking to her, but she

knew that he was trying. Still, she felt that he thought she was just a child. She wanted to be taken seriously. She wanted him to know that she understood what all of this meant.

"How old are you, Ruby?"

"Thirteen."

"When did you turn thirteen?"

"April 21st."

"Well, that was what, two weeks ago? Happy Birthday, then. And where do you go to school?"

"Park Jr. High. I'm in seventh grade this year."

"I remember the seventh grade. That can be a tricky grade sometimes, can't it?"

"It's not too bad. I have lots of friends there, so it makes it okay."

"And you have a sister?"

"Yes, sir. Shelby."

"Do you get along with Shelby?"

"She's only six, so we don't really fight. She gets on my nerves some."

"Little sisters can be hard sometimes, but always be good to her."

Ruby nodded her head. She was good to her sister. She tried to take care of her, so Shelby wouldn't have to see the things she had seen.

"What's your favorite subject?"

"English. I really like to read. You have a whole lot of books."

"Yes, I do. These are mostly books about the law, but I do like to read

when I have the time. What kind of books do you like to read?"

"My favorite book is The Outsiders. It's by a lady named S.E. Hinton. I've read all of her books." Ruby couldn't understand what all of these questions had to do with her father. Her father probably didn't even know that she liked to read.

There was a knock at the door, and a lady entered carrying a small machine. She was tall and thin with her hair pulled behind her head into a bun. She reminded Ruby of the librarian at school. All she needed was a pair of really big glasses.

"Julie, we're ready to get started when you get set up. Ruby, this is Julie. She's going to be taking notes about what we say in here."

"Okay." Ruby was starting to get scared. When it was just her and the judge, things weren't so bad. Now that someone else would be listening, she knew it would be harder to talk about her father.

"We can get started with the official testimony if no one has an objection. Ruby, I'm aware that your mother has explained what we will be doing today." Judge Banks moved to a camera behind him that Ruby had failed to notice before. "We have to have the camera, so we can show Mr. Gurley and his lawyer your testimony. This is what will keep you from having to talk in front of all of those people out in the courtroom. Is that okay?"

"Yes, sir. That's fine." Ruby looked over at Julie who was sitting in a chair identical to hers about five feet away with the little machine in front of her. She wanted her mother there with her, but her mother had told her earlier that

she would have to talk to the judge alone. Her father's lawyer had said that her mother would influence what she had to say.

"We'll start with some pretty basic questions, so you can get accustomed to the camera. If you feel like we need to stop just let me know. We have to have your most honest answers here, Ruby."

Ruby nodded her head. She was thinking again about wanting her mother, but she was determined not to let it show. If she could just go on with life like none of this was happening to her. She knew she couldn't do that, though. She knew that the only way for everything to be over was for her to tell everything she knew.

"For the record, will you please state your name?"

"Ruby. Ruby Gurley."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Can you tell me about your dad, Ruby?"

"My dad is great. He always brings me stuff like books and things when he comes home from work, and on the weekends, he takes me out fishing or for ice cream or something. He puts the worm on when we go fishing, though. He says it's okay that I don't like it, since I'm a girl."

The judge had a strange look on his face, and Ruby didn't know what it meant. After a minute, he shook his head and spoke again.

"Ruby, I'm sure Will is very good to you, and you'll have the chance to tell us about him soon, but I was wondering if you could tell me about Robert Gurley,

your father."

"Sorry." Ruby felt her face become very red. She hadn't thought of Robert Gurley as her father for a long time now. "The thing is, there isn't much to tell about him. It's been a while since I've really seen him."

"How long has it been?"

"I'm not too sure, but I think the last time was when I was nine."

"That's fine. I just want to know what you remember. Your mother can give us some help with the dates if we need them. Tell me about the last time you saw him. Do you remember what you did with your father?"

"Sort of. We went to a restaurant. The Hungry Fisherman. Shelby didn't go 'cause she was too little. It was a real neat place. It looked like a big ship, and all the people there wore sailor's clothes. They even had a big deck that you could walk out on and feed the fish. We did that after we ate."

"That sounds nice, Ruby. Did you have fun with your father?"

"I guess so."

"What else can you tell me?"

"We went to the Holiday Inn. He didn't live in Memphis where we lived, so we had to stay at a hotel. That's all I really know."

"You don't remember visiting him after that?"

"No, sir."

"How often do you talk to your father, Ruby?"

"Sometimes. I don't know how much. He just calls, but I never know when."

"And what does he say?"

"He says the same thing every time. He says he loves me and he misses me. But he doesn't mean it."

"How do you know he doesn't mean it?"

Ruby didn't want to talk about Robert anymore. He wasn't her father in the same way Will was. Will was her dad.

"Because he never calls until he's drunk. Then he just calls and says he loves me over and over. Sometimes maybe I want to believe him. He's supposed to love me and everything. I can't believe him, though. If I believe it, then I'll just be sad later."

"Why, Ruby? Why would you be sad later?"

"Because he won't call again for a pretty long time. Not even on my birthday. Any person that loves you will call you on your birthday, especially somebody's father." Ruby could feel her face turn red again. She was starting to cry. How could she cry now? She had lived with this every day. She had gotten good at pretending it was someone else's story. Telling it shouldn't matter anymore, but hearing it in her own voice made it more real than ever. It made it her story again.

"Why didn't you see your father after you were nine?"

"He never came around. I didn't want to, though."

"Why didn't you want to see him?"

"He scares me sometimes."

"How does he scare you, Ruby?"

"He gets really mean sometimes, and I don't like to be with him when he gets mean."

"Has Robert ever been mean to you?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Ruby swallowed hard. She'd never talked to anyone about what had happened to her. Not even her mom. It was just something that was over, and they never talked about it.

"I've never talked about it before."

"Well, Ruby, we need you to talk about it now. It's really important for me to know everything, so I can make a decision. Do you understand the decision I have to make?"

"Yes, sir. You have to decide if I get to be a Sullivan."

"That's right, Ruby, so I need you to talk to me about everything."

"Okay."

"Do you remember living with Robert Gurley?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me everything you can remember."

"I only really remember right before we left. My father had been really mad for a long time. I don't know what made him so mad, but he yelled a lot and threw things around a lot. One night, it was storming really bad outside, and I got scared. Mom had just brought Shelby home from the hospital. I wanted to go in and sleep with Robert and my mom. Mom said it was okay, so I started to

get into the bed with them. He got really mad, though. He started screaming and yelling and told me I better get back into my own bed before he got out his belt."

"And what did you do?"

"I turned around and walked out of their room, but I didn't go back into my own. Not until my mom came out into the hall. She took me back to my room and stayed in there with me."

"Do you remember anything else like that?"

"The night we left. We ran away from him, you know? We thought he was going to kill us."

"Tell me about that night."

"Me and mom were in the kitchen, and Shelby was in her seat on the counter. I was helping her cook supper. I really like to help my mom cook. Robert came in and said he didn't like what mom was cooking, and he wanted her to cook something else. She said it was too late. It was almost finished. He picked up stuff off the oven and started throwing everything around. Food got all over the wall. Shelby started to scream first, and then me and mom started to cry, so he left the room. He went outside, and mom locked all the doors. We watched him go to his car and get out a gun, so mom called the police. He started banging on the door, so me and mom took Shelby back to her bedroom and locked the door. We just stayed there until we heard the police calling for us to come out. They had him in the back of their car. The next week we ran away."

"And that's what you remember of living with Mr. Gurley?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about Will. Can you tell me a little about him?"

"I love Dad. Will. He's really good to us. He doesn't yell or throw things. He helps with my homework when I ask. He's what a dad should be."

"Do you want him to adopt you?"

"Yes, sir. I want that more than anything."

"Okay, then. I think I have enough information. I'm going to let you go see your mom and dad now."

"Are you going to let me and Shelby be Sullivans?"

"I can't say right now. We'll let you know soon, though."

Ruby got out of her chair and walked out into the hallway. She saw her mom and dad sitting at the end of the hall. She wanted to run down to them, but she didn't want them to think that she had been afraid. She wanted them to know that she had done well.

"Hey, sweetheart. How did it go?" Will squeezed Ruby's shoulder.

"It was fine, Dad. I answered all his questions. He said he'd let us know soon."

"He will, honey. He will."

Ruby felt like she had waited for months, but only two days had gone by when she was called from class to the office. Her parents were waiting there for her when she walked in the door.

"Hi Mom. Dad. Is something wrong?"

"The judge called. He's made his decision, and we have to go over to the courthouse."

"Well, that's good, isn't it. He's ready to tell us that me and Shelby can be Sullivans."

"Yes, I'm sure that's what it is. Do you have your homework?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, then. Let's get to the courthouse."

Ruby sat in the backseat staring out the window. She didn't say a word on the drive to the courthouse. She was afraid the judge might tell them that she and Shelby couldn't be Sullivans because her testimony wasn't good enough. She had done all she could and told him everything she knew, but she was still afraid. How would she react if he said no?

When Ruby walked into the courtroom, the first person she saw was Robert Gurley. Even though it had been a long time since she had seen him, she knew it was him. Her mother had told her that he would be there, but she would rather have had this whole thing go by without having to see him. When the door closed behind her and her parents, Robert turned and looked in their direction. He actually smiled at Ruby, like he had just seen her a few hours ago. Ruby saw him try to stand, but his lawyer pushed him back to his seat. Ruby tried hard not to look at him, and followed her parents down to the front to a table identical to her father's.

"There's Robert." Ruby looked up to her mother.

"Are you okay?" Beth held her hand a little tighter.

"I don't have to talk to him, do I?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"No matter what the judge says?"

"Let's just see what happens. We'll deal with that when the time comes."

A policeman walked into the room from behind the judge's stand.

"All rise. The Honorable Judge Banks will oversee these proceedings."

Ruby stood with her parents and everyone else in the courtroom and watched the judge walk into the room and take his place at the desk in front.

"Be seated. I have had the opportunity to hear testimony in the case of Sullivan versus Gurley. I must say that these cases come along too often. While I don't expect you to stay married, I do expect more out of someone who takes on the responsibility of being a parent."

Ruby looked at her mother, and her mother squeezed her hand again.

"Mr. Gurley, you have neglected your responsibilities to your daughters by not paying child support and not playing a larger role in their lives. They're lucky, though. They had Mr. Sullivan to take your place. I have decided to fulfill the request of Will Sullivan and allow him to adopt Ruby and Shelby Gurley. Court adjourned."

The judge slammed a gavel down on his table. Ruby's mom and dad put their arms around her and held her in a tight circle. Ruby was so happy that she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. The circle was broken when Robert began to yell.

"What do you mean, Will Sullivan can have my daughters? He'll never have them because they belong to me. I don't care what any of you say."

The officer rushed over and took Robert by the shoulder as he led him out of the courtroom.