

THE PRIZE

She was sixteen before she found out they weren't her real parents. It might not have happened then if Pops hadn't been coming off the anesthesia. He was still half loopy and Delia and her mother were giddy with the good news. She knew Mom worried that the plumber's diet, the daily double cheeseburger and supersized fries, might be a factor. The doctor gave the all-clear though, and recommended a follow-up colonoscopy five years out. "After all the house drains I rooted out," Pops told the two of them, "and here they go snaking a tube up my tailpipe." They laughed as if they hadn't heard it five times before.

"We didn't know what we were getting into," he said when he first woke up and focused on her. "Or what we were doing when we picked you out of those other adoption babies." He was propped up on the angled hospital bed with a pillow behind him. "Your mama said it had to be a girl and, well, I went along to make her happy." The mood left her mother's face like draining bathwater. "We reached into that box of Crackerjack, and you were the prize." Both his arms stretched toward Delia from the gaping sleeves of his patient gown, like she was supposed to hug him for saying that. She did.

The ladies sat quietly in the waiting room while Pops got dressed and processed out. Her mother broke the silence. "Baby, we always loved you like, as much as . . ." She was having a hard time putting her words into sentences. Delia had a hard time putting her tumbling thoughts into words.

"Where'd you, like, get me from?"

“Right here. Downtown Middleton. Through the Women’s Health Center.”

The more she thought about it, she wondered why she didn’t have doubts years before. She didn’t look much like either one of them. People said her mom was fair as country buttermilk, covered in orange freckles with rich auburn hair. Folks started calling Pops “Papa Smurf” way before Delia came along. Maybe because he was short, had a build like that old cartoon character and it paired up with their last name; Smurf McMurphy.

She was always one of the tallest girls at school with round brown eyes, raven hair, and what the Health teacher called an “olive” complexion. She had noticeable boobs and started shaving around the edge of her bikini bottom when she was eleven. Older guys showed interest before her teens. When people would ask, Mom said she looked just like the great aunt she was named after, although nobody else seemed to know or talk much about Aunt Delia.

Some weeks before Pops blabbed in the recovery room, she was one of two girls handed a personal business card from the photographer taking school pictures. He said his R/V was a mobile studio and wanted to discuss a career in professional modeling. What he really wanted is another story but, with school life and everything else developing rapidly, the notion of ‘real parents’ never crossed her mind. After what Pops said that day, it was hard for her to focus on anything else. It wasn’t a completely conscious thing, but she didn’t think about her parents the same way. At first, there was hurt, anger and disillusionment with the falsehood she had lived. Then it all started to make sense. She belonged in another life, in another place.

In her fresh, bright imaginings, Delia carried the exotic DNA to pursue any career path she wanted. *A famous scientist or surgeon, physicist or astronaut, even. How could that ever*

happen here, in the middle of a little town, the middle of a rectangular state, bordered all around by other rectangles, dead in the middle of the country?

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They sat in wicker chairs on her best friend's back porch during Spring Break, junior year. Delia and Brittany regularly shared their enthusiasms. Few had been this exciting.

"Hell, we gotta know," Britt said. A slight breeze rustled the stray blonde strands hanging around her face like corn silk waving in the thousand planted acres abutting her backyard. "We gotta see who they are. Find out your real name, for fuck sake! You could be somebody." Delia felt her inner smile, as she often did, at the differences between them. Britt could come across a little rough. As they went inside to the computer, Delia tapped Britt's face to remind her.

"Better put some antibiotic ointment on that little red patch. Your mom will notice the nose-ring hole, for sure."

They sat in her dark, closed up bedroom and found lots of success stories on the internet about people finding their biological parents. But in most cases, their quests began with more background information. All they had was the Women's Health Center, and it closed down in '08. There were articles about banks failing back then and public funding drying up. Women's Health dried up with it. The Center had been a non-profit founded and run by Mrs. Hawthorne, who Delia thought was mostly nuts back when she went with Pops for maintenance work on her properties.

"Let's go talk to her," was Britt's inspiration.

“Yeah well, I haven’t spoken to the old witch since her husband died and their rental houses got foreclosed on, and that time I thought she was mostly psycho.”

“Look right here.” Brittany’s pointing fingernail was pale blue in the computer screen light. She scrolled half-way down and read from the article. “*Eliza Hawthorne was instrumental in fostering a relationship with regional adoption agencies.*” She turned and the thrill of mystery buzzed in the lit half of her face. “If anybody might know something about your real parents, it’s her.” Delia had to agree but wished for a different place to start.

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Pops wanted Delia to study for the license and take over his plumbing business. He’d worked for years, he said, filling his old Rolodex with reliable, local paying clientele. They were sitting in the open garage one afternoon, dangling their legs from the work-truck tailgate. She realized for the first time that she was a full head taller. The draft from the side door swirled the smells of porcelain, plastic pipe, and glue in a dewy mist around their heads. He rocked back and forth slowly, balancing parts of some invisible message he wanted to convey.

“All this will be yours, Delia honey. Look, I don’t know no internet and hell, I still do bids and spreadsheets on paper. You’ll be running this show someday.” Allergy season didn’t start those tears swelling in his narrow green eyes. She looked into them on either side of that ski-slope nose and, in spite of all his short comings, knew then that she loved him. “When I’m gone, they say there’ll be opportunity for a minority-owned business to really grow into something.”

“Wait, what do you mean, minority owned?”

“You know, female business owners. Grants, government contracts, such as that.”

Delia couldn't bring herself to tell him right then. She might have other plans.

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Brittany was Delia's bestie since middle school, just as pretty and an academic superstar right up until they were juniors. Delia knew Britt's brother as a clumsy creep, always brushing past for chances to feel her up. Then he got the engineering scholarship to the University of Florida. The girls talked about getting one to State and working together in campus labs to find the cure for cancer, or AIDS, the common cold, even. Britt met Kyle, started doing drugs, and then started doing Kyle. That's another story too, but it effectively put an end to their talks about being famous doctors or scientists.

Sometimes Britt would go along with Delia when Pops went out on service calls. He'd be under the house and they'd be stationed inside, turning the water on or off when he called up through the floor, or tapping with a wrench so he could identify the right pipe. They'd snoop through people's closets and dresser drawers while he maneuvered around down there in the crawl space. Once, while waiting for Pops to climb around the attic, Britt realized, "You know, you can learn a lot about customers just by going through shit in their medicine cabinets."

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Every day on the school bus ride home, they would see Mrs. Hawthorne with the dogs in her front yard. The girls put on their cool new Nikes and walked the eleven blocks back across town. There was a huge budding maple tree across the street from Mrs. Hawthorne's house. The ground was still cool and damp even though weeks had passed since it sucked up the last melting snow. They sat on fat, protruding tree roots, peeling open the fallen seed pods and sticking them

on their faces like crazy noses. Brittany puffed hard on her e-cig and tried to blow smoke rings, but the breeze wouldn't cooperate.

Mrs. Hawthorne came out in bathrobe and slippers about twenty minutes later. White, yipping fuzz balls orbited her ankles like stuffed, mechanical toys on a tether. She didn't see the girls suck up the courage to cross the street. They stepped through the wrought-iron gate, stuck open with rust, and took a few steps up the flagstone walk.

Their movements made the old lady turn toward them. One clouded, silver eye stared wide and round, the other narrowed around the side of her face in a nervous squint. She watched as if the girls were sci-fi creatures emerging from the mists of her mind. The dogs peeled off in barking circles around their feet.

“Hello, I'm Delia. McMurphy Plumbing? Remember me?”

“Oh, yes child.” It took her a long moment to respond, and Delia could tell, she didn't remember.

“This is my friend, Brittany.” The old lady rolled back her shoulders. Her chin floated upward.

“Charmed, I'm sure,” she said and extended one hand, bent at the wrist in her direction. Brittany took her hand by the fingers and dropped into an awkward, comic curtsy. *Swear to God*, Delia screamed inside her head, *you play too much. This is serious business for me.*

Delia blurted out phrases that didn't come out like she rehearsed; being adopted, Mrs. Hawthorne's reputation for all the fine work at Women's Health, their search for information on biological parents and so on, until Britt just came out with it.

“So, do you know who her real parents are?”

“There are ethical concerns here,” Mrs. Hawthorne began slowly. Her voice had changed with her body language, as if someone else was now speaking. She looked over the top of their heads as she spoke, reminding Delia of that actress her parents watch on the classic movie channel. *The woman in all those movies with Tracy Spenser. The one with that guy on the African Queen.* “But with the demise of the Health Center, the passing of time,” her thought trailed off. “However, when you come next time, my recollection may improve with a pack of Marlboro Lights, perhaps a bottle of white zinfandel.”

“That ain’t happening,” Britt told her. “Don’t have a car, the money--,”

“And we’re sixteen.” Delia finished for her.

“Oh, I see.” She seemed to watch her wine request fade across the horizon. “Let’s sit down and talk, girls.” Delia thought she meant inside, but she bunched her robe in her lap and settled right there, on the slate front steps between the weathered concrete lion statues.

She said she remembered Pops and her mom, after Delia described them at length, and the busy times working with the agency. Mrs. Hawthorne moved her hands in the air in front of her, like trying to conjure her memory in a crystal ball. After the second time the poodle tried to hump her leg, Britt jumped in to redirect the conversation.

“Do you remember the people who gave her up?” The words came out stark and hard and ended with both of them turning to look at Delia. It took a moment for Mrs. Hawthorne’s stare to thaw.

“Yes, I do. Probably because mixed couples weren’t seen much around here in those days. On television, yes. In Middleton, no.” Her head turned and, as she focused again at some distant point, it all came spilling out. “The name may have been Hamilton. Michael Hamilton, as I recall. His family lived a few miles outside of town. He brought you to us, late in the fall, before going back to med-school. In Topeka, I believe.”

“Did you ever see him after that? Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“No. Only that I seem to recall some notoriety associated with that name. Something related to a Pulitzer, maybe Nobel Prize.” The new lead made the girls anxious to hurry away. They stood, thanked the old lady for her time, and were stepping toward the gate when Britt turned back with one more question.

“What did you mean? Mixed couples?”

“Mixed as in folks descended from original settlers of this town, with those who, shall I say, come through to work the harvest.”

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They were so excited that they jogged most of the way until they were back in Britt’s dark bedroom at the computer. It all started to make sense to Delia. *Now, I have footsteps to follow, maybe into a world-famous career. Medicine. Science.*

The better part of the next few days was spent searching the internet. They found plenty of Hamiltons, even doctors named Michael who schooled in Topeka, but no clues tied them back to Middleton. Britt wouldn’t let them give up easily. They ran up big charges on her mom’s credit card, with full annual memberships to those sites like People Spotters, Family Finders,

searching every combination of words they could imagine. They even checked out online real-estate records but couldn't get a good match, even going back a full ten years. Delia finally said it.

“Maybe some things just can't be found out.”

Britt looked relieved. She slumped back in the rolling desk chair. “I know, right?” She pooched out her lower lip and blew feathery strands of hair straight up above her face.

After that, it came up in conversation now and then, but with their senior year upon them, there were lots of other things going on. Britt's brother would be living in a dorm and had to leave his truck behind that first year. She promised to take good care of it. The girls didn't walk too many places after he was gone.

Going into that year, Delia was near the top ten percent of her class and, with scholarships in mind, she worked to get there. Britt probably would have too, but there were those other distractions. First semester, she got suspended for repeated dress-code violations. She could have come back, but refused to conform, in honor of strong women and spaghetti-strap tops everywhere. Britt dropped out and got a cashier job at the Quik Check. It wasn't like the old days, but they still hung out together sometimes.

That's where Delia was during that Christmas Break, standing in Britt's checkout line when she sensed something creeping up over her left shoulder. She caught a whiff like the mothballs old people keep in vanity cabinets and jumped after she turned to look. They hadn't seen Mrs. Hawthorne since that conversation on her front steps. But she was there, leaning in so close and strange that Delia almost dropped her Arizona Iced Tea. The old lady looked from her

to Britt and back again, and a memory peeked from somewhere behind those crooked, arched eyebrows.

“Cameron,” she said. The thin, pale lips quivered before she spoke again. “Michael Cameron was the name. The man who brought you in to the Center. Seeing you two here together, it just came to me.” Their secret mission was on again. “Cameron” was another one of those dead-white-male names going back to the town’s original founders.

As soon as Britt’s shift was up they were back at her house, googling new leads as fast as they could think them up. They found a tax record with a local address. They drove out there, but all they saw was an old, shut down factory with No Trespassing and For Sale signs wired to the chain-link fence.

They found an old post office box listed for a Michael F. Cameron, M.D. in their zip code. Then, an apartment in Topeka and a business address in Orlando. They were energized, finding the phone listing in a Florida area code. Not so much when the number they dialed was not in service. A new people-search site came up with a different number to try.

“This is Michael.” The recorded voice sounded tired, worn out. “Please leave a message at the tone.” But the voice-mail box was full then, and again the dozens of times Delia after, every time she thought to call. It was early March when someone finally picked up the phone.

“Hullo?” he said. She’d practiced in her mind so many different ways that words came out mixed together, all around the unasked question. She stopped and took a deep breath.

“Are you there Dr. Cameron? She could hear him breathing. “I’m looking for my real father and think you may be him.” The conversation shifted from there, his tone of voice changing from sleepy to almost excited. He’d always wondered about her and hoped they’d meet

up someday. “Dream of a lifetime” is how he put it. When he asked if they could get together and visit, she realized that somehow, she hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Do you ever get back here to Middleton?”

“No,” he said quietly after a long pause. “Currently, there are some issues, some business matters that prevent me from leaving Florida. But, next time you get down to the Gulf Coast, please know you have an open invitation. Just call ahead when you get close.”

Showing the address he gave was all it took for Brittany to come up with a scam to get away. Their Spring Break was five days away. Britt’s mother was moved at her thoughtful daughter’s wish to make a surprise visit to her brother at the university. She’d take Delia along for company. Her mother even came up with some money and baked goods to take along. Those college brochures Delia’s Mom laid around the house helped convince Pops it wasn’t too late for Delia to visit a good campus.

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For girls who had never been that far south, or even out of state, it was a major adventure. They practiced, tracking local places with the smart-phone GPS. Most exciting was Googling for directions and seeing their route mapped out from Middleton all the way to that street number on South Tamiami Trail.

The highway was the same gray, undulating ribbon through the rectangular states, and most of the way east on I-10 until they made that last big turn south. Their first sleepless motel experience; car doors slamming, loud talking, and ice machines clattering, made them hesitant to spend another night on the road. One drove while the other pulled up online images: palm trees

and dolphins, clear aqua waves on white sand beaches, sunshine and bikinis. Delia was at the wheel when Britt was searching web news about doctors in Florida.

“Damn, girl! You might be rich and not know it! He must have made it big in prescription drug manufacturing.”

“What are you talking about?” Delia looked over but couldn’t read the phone screen from the driver’s seat.

“It says here he’s connected with one of the biggest pill mills in the state. Now we know. Can you say, ocean-side mansions, limos?” Delia might not have been able to put it into words, but all she wanted was to meet him face-to-face. At the next restroom stop, she made the call.

“Hullo?” Like the first time, it sounded like she woke him up.

“Dr. Cameron, this is Delia. You said call when we get close. We’re about thirty miles from you at a Wawa in Tampa.” She didn’t think she’d been as nervous those previous two times on the phone, waiting through his long pauses, not knowing what he would say next. She angled the phone off her ear for Britt to hear.

“That’s, uh, awesome girl. Stay on that road. Brings you right here. The main gate will be closed by now.” Britt leaned into Delia’s field of vision and silently mouthed the words, Main Gate. The voice said, “Go past it and turn into the service entrance. I’m in unit 13A.”

They counted down the street numbers, getting closer and closer. Sitting at a stop light, they realized they had arrived. The whole block was one address, the one she had written down. The long, white wall in front of the place was all covered up in flowery bushes. The wide sign lit up above the locked front gate read ‘Tropical Safari,’ in big, colored cartoon letters.

Gravel crunched under the tires as they turned down the service road. In the dim, diffused yellow light, they could just make out the buildings. Delia guessed they'd be called mobile homes, because most had wheels. But, with all the attached, closed-in porches and vine-covered patios, it didn't look like they'd be rolling anywhere, anytime soon. The heavy evening air carried the scent of hay and manure and damp peanut shells. On the other side of the lane, noises from tall canvas-covered frames suggested large, moving creatures inside.

Among the row of white mailbox poles they spotted the right number. Blue television light flickered beyond the window in one end of 13A. The girls sat in the parked truck for several minutes looking at each other. Delia felt like there had been some mistake. She just couldn't explain why.

"We going in, or what?" Britt asked. Almost before Delia could shake herself into the sense to follow, Britt swung out of the truck and was up to the trailer, about to knock. The door opened and a narrow wedge of light cast Britt in stark silhouette. Delia stood in the shadow behind her.

"Oh my freakin' God!" Delia could barely see the figure in the doorway, mouth hanging open, both hands pressed against his head. *Like the guy shouting in that famous painting by Munchkin*, she thought. Cameron reached out to hug Britt. "You look just like your mother!"

"Hey, I'm Brittany." She stuck out a hand to shake. Footsteps crunched in the shell path behind her. "She's Delia."

"Oh, yeah. Wow." His shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, was printed in a pattern of exotic birds and palm leaves. Stitched in sunshine gold above the pocket were letters that spelled

‘Mike.’ “Well, you too, babe.” He shook Delia’s hand, too. “Come in, come in. I want to hear everything about you.”

The narrow room smelled of weed, dirty gym socks, and sour beer. He wove one hand between some bottles to turn on a table lamp. There were piles of papers with lawyers’ letterheads on the sofa. He shuffled them together and motioned for the girls to sit. Delia was still nervous, talking in quick, broken phrases about how they found him, their trip to Florida, working around to the questions she wanted to ask.

An overturned yellow plastic crate served as a coffee table in the space between them. He lifted a half joint from the ashtray and, along with a flaming plastic lighter, offered in their direction. Britt’s face lit up at first but, with the hard cut of Delia’s eyes toward her, got the message right away.

“We don’t smoke,” Delia said. He dropped his head and returned the items to the makeshift table. He didn’t need any more. It was clear he was already baked.

“That’s a good thing, I guess.” He had this nervous way of looking off after each time he spoke, as if some unpredictable game-changer could arrive at any moment. “It’s all good.”

“We thought you were a doctor.” Britt had a direct way of talking to people. “That’s what Delia wants to be, anyway.”

“Well, I,” he took a long pull from a tall beer can. “I am. Will be that is, once my license is reinstated. Specializing in pain management right now.”

“So, what are you doing here? At Tropical Safari?”

“Ensuring proper animal medication.” His head snapped toward them. “Say, where are my manners? Would you all like a beer?”

“Don’t drink either and--,” Delia began . . .

“Dude, we’re seventeen,” Britt finished. Right there was when he started crying. Not the teardrop-running-down-the-cheek thing. More like grocery cart toddler bawling. It was so weird the girls stood and might have bolted but he caught himself, waved his hands in the air, and motioned for them to sit back down.

“I was almost seventeen when I met your mother.” He sat on that wooden stool with his hands covering his eyes while he talked. “Back in the day,” he told them, he worked part-time for his dad after school, doing inventory at the plant outside of town. Migrant families would come up for temporary jobs early each year, staying in quarters on the factory compound, before time came to move on for farm work further north. One quiet, late night in December, they came through on the return trip.

“I was studying when a rap on my bedroom window damn near scared the shit of me.” He recognized the young man who waved him out to the van at the end of the driveway. “Your mother was in the passenger seat, holding a Minnesota Vikings blanket in her arms. “She had sent notes in the mail, and sometimes I wrote back. But honest to God, I don’t think I ever said anything about getting married.” When the van pulled away, it left him holding a purple bundle of Delia.

“I was always a Bears fan,” he said. “Anyway, maybe I can find one of her letters for when you get up in the morning.” There was a quiet moment where the girls didn’t need to look at each other to know they were thinking the same thing.

“We have to be going,” Delia said.

“You’re welcome to stay here. You girls take the bedroom.” He pointed down the short hall where a pile of sheets lay on a gray, unmade mattress. “Won’t be the first time I slept on this old couch.”

“My brother is expecting us later this evening,” Britt lied, and the silence hung heavy enough to answer any unspoken questions.

Walking the girls out to the truck, he kept spilling details he could remember. That’s when he said her mother’s name and that, last he knew, they kept a family home in Nuevo Laredo. He would send the address when he found it. “Boxes in there I haven’t looked at since I landed here.” He hugged them both and stepped back.

Britt had started the engine and dropped the truck in gear when he yelled, “Wait,” and slapped the back of the cab. Delia put the window down. “Listen baby, you can be anything you want. It’s all in front of you. You don’t have to end up like this.” He pointed directly over his shoulder as if some unseen pile of troubles lay nearby in the dark. “I tried too hard to be the success my father was.” His voice cracked and made her think he might start crying again.

“So what’d your father do? Britt asked. In the glow from the dashboard, his face lit up when he realized they didn’t know.

“He retooled the old plastics factory to make lawn and patio furniture out of PVC pipe. Brought jobs and big investment money back to town. The Ledger Herald wrote that Middleton ought to nominate him for the Nobel Prize in Economics.”

Britt's foot slipped on the brake pedal, probably on purpose, and the truck eased forward. He pushed himself upright from the door with both hands. "Keep in touch. When I get another cell phone I'll call you." They drove ten blocks toward nowhere in silence.

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Not always like you thought, but things work out, Delia reflects. They had kept their story straight by driving most of that night to visit Britt's brother on campus, sleeping in the truck to surprise him the next morning. He was upbeat until he freaked out over the decals on the truck windows and fuzzy pink trim Britt had glued to the dashboard. *He got over it, though*, she remembers, hugging both tight as they left. *The perv wet-kissed my ear.*

It's been almost four years since then. Britt got her GED and is working toward her Dental Assistant Certification. They call the community college a university now. The girls see each other on campus occasionally. Delia is finishing her business degree and taking online classes toward her MBA.

That's where she researched Chapter 11. She hadn't known how bad the recession hit Pops' business but, reorganization seems to be working out. He supervises three crews now and is almost always home for dinner every day well before dark. *Mom doesn't need to worry about him pushing water heaters up flights of stairs. Maybe he's squeezed that big belly through his last crawl space.*

Delia sits at a desk in the middle of her office, in the middle of the block, the middle of town, as always before. Pinned to the corkboard behind her is a newspaper photo of the family being awarded the Chamber of Commerce Trophy. The caption reads "New Small Business of

the Year.” Delia is in the middle, as president of Ortega-McMurphy Plumbing, LLC. *Mom looks happy as ever*, on her left. Pops is on the other side, *wearing that goofy grin*, holding the prize.
