

THE PRIZE

I was sixteen before I found out they weren't my real parents. It might not have happened then if Pops hadn't been coming off the anesthesia. He was still half loopy and me and my mother were giddy with the good news. I 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 us, "and here they go snaking a tube up my tailpipe." We laughed as if we hadn't already heard it five times before.

"We didn't know what we were getting into," he said when he first woke up and looked straight at me. "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 upbeat mood was leaving mom's face like draining bathwater. "We reached into that box of Cracker Jack and you were the prize, honey girl." Both his arms stretched toward me from the gaping sleeves of his patient gown, like I was supposed to hug him for saying that. I did.

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

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

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

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

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

Several weeks before Pops blabbed in the recovery room, I 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. The way he perv-ed hard on me when I got there is another story but, with school life and everything else up in my face, the notion of ‘real parents’ never really crossed my mind. After what Pops said that day, it was hard for me to focus on anything else. I don’t think it was a completely conscious thing, but after that I didn’t think about my parents the same way. At first, there was hurt and anger at my whole, fake existence. Then it all started to slowly come together and make sense. I belonged in another life, in another place.

For all I knew, I might carry exotic DNA to pursue any career path I 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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We were sitting in the wicker chairs on Britt's back porch during Spring Break, junior year. For years we had shared just about every new twist and turn that happened to us. Few had been this exciting.

"Hell, we gotta know," Britt said. A slight breeze rustled the stray blonde strands hanging around her face like the corn silk waving in a thousand planted acres butting up to her backyard. "We gotta see who they are. Find out your real name, for fuck sake! You could be somebody." Britt could come across a little rough. It was one of those times I had to smile inside at the differences between us. As we went inside to her computer, I tapped at my nose to remind her.

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

"Yeah I know, right?"

We sat in her dark, closed-up bedroom and found lots of success stories on the internet about people locating their biological parents. But in most cases, their searches began with more background information. All we 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 I thought was mostly nuts back when I 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, and she may be kinda whack.”

“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.” I had to agree but wished for a different place to start.

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Pops wanted me 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. We were sitting in the open garage one afternoon, legs dangling from the work-truck tailgate. I realized for the first time that I 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 our heads. He rocked back and forth slowly, balancing parts of some invisible message he was trying 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. I looked into them on either side of that ski-slope nose and, in spite of all his short comings, knew then that I 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.”

I couldn't bring myself to tell him right then. I might have other plans.

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Brittany was my BFF since middle school, just as pretty and an academic superstar right up until we were juniors. I knew Britt's brother as a clumsy creep, always bumping past when we played kids' games for chances to feel me up. Then he got the engineering scholarship to the University of Florida. That got us talking 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 pretty much put an end to our talks about being famous doctors or scientists.

Sometimes Britt would go along when I went with Pops on service calls. He'd be under the house and we'd be stationed inside, turning the water on or off when he called up through the floor, or having us tap with a wrench so he could identify the right pipe. We would 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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Most days on the school bus ride home, we would see old Mrs. Hawthorne with the dogs in her front yard. We put on our 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. We sat on fat, protruding tree roots, peeling open the fallen seed pods and sticking them

on our faces like crazy costume 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. Those white, yipping fuzz balls orbited her ankles like stuffed, mechanical toys on tethers. She didn't see us as we sucked up the courage to cross the street. We stepped through the wrought-iron gate, stuck open with rust, and took a few steps up the flagstone walk.

Our movements made the old lady turn toward us. One clouded, silver eye stared wide and round. The other narrowed above her cheek bone in a nervous squint. She watched as if we were sci-fi creatures emerging from the mists of her mind. The dogs peeled off in barking circles around our feet.

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

"Oh, yes child." It took her a long moment to respond, and I 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 girl*, I was screaming inside my head, *you play too much. This is serious business for me.*

I blurted out phrases that didn't come out like I rehearsed; me being adopted, Mrs. Hawthorne's reputation for all the fine work at Women's Health, our 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?”

Mrs. Hawthorne began slowly. “There are ethical concerns here.” Her voice had changed with her body language, as if someone else was now speaking. She looked over the top of our heads as she spoke, reminding me of that actress my parents watch on the classic movie channel. *The woman in all those movies with Tracy Spenser*, I was thinking. *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.”

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

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

“Oh, I see.” She seemed to watch her request for wine and cigs fade across the horizon. “Let’s sit down and talk, girls.” At first I thought she meant inside, but she bunched the 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 my mom, after I 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 she was trying to conjure up her memory in a crystal ball. After the second time the poodle tried to hump Britt’s leg, she 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 slowly turning to look at me. 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 us anxious to hurry away. We 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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We were so excited that we jogged most of the way until they were back in Britt’s dark bedroom at the computer. It all started to make sense to me. I had footsteps to follow, maybe into a world-famous career. Medicine. Science.

We spent the better part of the next few days searching the internet. We found plenty of Hamiltons, even doctors named Michael who schooled in Topeka, but no clues tied them back to Middleton. Britt wouldn’t let us give up easily. We 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 we could come up with. We even checked out online real-estate records but couldn't get a good match, even going back a full ten years. I finally said what we were both thinking.

“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 our senior year coming at us, 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. We didn't walk too many places after he was gone.

Going into that semester, I was near the top ten percent of our class and, with scholarships in mind, 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 we still hung out together sometimes.

That's where I was during that Christmas Break, standing in Britt's checkout line when I sensed something creeping up over my left shoulder. I caught a whiff like the mothballs old people keep in vanity cabinets and jumped after I turned to look. We hadn't seen Mrs. Hawthorne since that conversation on her front steps. But she was there, leaning in so close and strange that I almost dropped my Arizona Iced Tea. The old lady looked from me 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.” Our 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 we were back at her house, googling new leads as fast as we could think them up. We found a tax record with a local address. We drove out there, but all we saw was an old, shut down factory with No Trespassing and For Sale signs wired to the chain-link fence.

We found an old post office box listed for a Michael F. Cameron, M.D. in our zip code. Then, an apartment in Topeka and a business address in Orlando. We were energized when we found the phone listing in a Florida area code. Not so much when the number we 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 the dozens of times after, every time I thought to call. It was early March when someone finally picked up the phone.

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

“Are you there Dr. Cameron?” I 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 me and hoped we’d meet up someday. “Dream of a lifetime” is how he put it. When he asked if we could get together and visit I realized that somehow, I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Do you ever get back here to Middleton?”

“No,” he said quietly after a long pause and what I took as a shift to his professional voice. “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 me was all it took for Brittany to come up with a scam for us to get away. Our Spring Break was five days away. Britt’s mother was so moved at her thoughtful daughter’s wish to make a surprise visit to her brother at the university that little tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. Britt explained it would be safe if she took me along for company. Her mother even said she would come up with some money and baked goods for us to take along. I thought there was no way I could sell the idea at my house, but all those college brochures I laid on the end tables helped convince my folks it wasn’t too late for me to visit a good out-of-state campus.

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

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

trees and dolphins, clear aqua waves on white sand beaches, sunshine and bikinis. I 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?” I 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?” I might not have been able to put it into words then, but all I really wanted was to meet him face-to-face. Before we started driving after the next restroom stop, I made the call.

“Hullo?” Like the first time, it sounded like I 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.” I didn’t think I’d been as nervous those previous two times on the phone, waiting through his long pauses, not knowing what he would say next. I angled the phone off my ear for Britt to listen.

“That’s, uh, awesome girl. Stay on that road. Brings you right here. The main gate will be closed by now.” Britt leaned into my 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.”

We counted down the street numbers, getting closer and closer. Sitting at a stop light, we realized we had arrived. The whole block was one address, the one I 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 we turned down the service road. In the dim, diffused yellow service lights, we could just make out the buildings. I guess 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 wet 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 we spotted the right number. Blue television light flickered beyond the window in one end of 13A. We sat in the parked truck for several minutes looking at each other. I couldn’t help feeling like there had been some mistake. I just couldn’t explain why.

“We going in, or what?” Britt asked. Almost before I could shake myself 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. I stood in the shadow behind her.

“Oh my freakin’ God!” I could see his outline in the doorway, mouth hanging open, both hands pressed against the sides of his head. I thought of the figure shouting in that famous painting by that guy, Munchkin. 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 snaked one hand between some empty 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 us to sit. I was still nervous, talking in quick, broken phrases about how we found him, our trip to Florida, working around to the questions I wanted to ask.

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

“We don’t smoke,” I 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 over his shoulder 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 us. “Say, where are my manners? Would you all like a beer?”

“Don’t drink either and--,” I 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 Britt and I jumped up and might have bolted but he caught himself, waved his hands in the air, and motioned for us 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 us, 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 for them 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 said he recognized the young man who was waving 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 that van pulled away, it left him holding a purple bundle of me.

“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 Britt and I didn’t need to look at each other to know we were thinking the same thing.

“We have to be going,” I 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 us out to the truck, he kept spilling random details he could remember. That’s when he said my mother’s full 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 us 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. I 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 me 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 we 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 an editorial saying 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 give you a call.” We drove twenty blocks toward nowhere in silence.
