

THE PRIZE

“Hell, we gotta know,” Britt said. We shared enthusiasms back then and this really had her stoked. Spring Break, junior year, us in the wicker chairs on her back porch. A slight breeze rustled 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!” She could come off a little rough. “You could be somebody.” As we went inside to the computer, I reminded her to put some antibiotic ointment on that little red patch of skin or her parents would notice the nose-ring hole, for sure.

We 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, they started with way more information than us. All we had was the Women’s Health Center and it closed down in 2008. 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 when Pops and I did regular work on her rental properties.

“Let’s go talk to her,” was Britt’s bright idea. I hadn’t spoken to the old witch since her husband died and their rental houses got foreclosed on. I think she still owes Pops some money. “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 my way 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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I was sixteen when I found out I wasn't their kid. Might not have happened then if Pops hadn't been coming off anesthesia. He was still half loopy and both of them 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 heard it five times before.

"We didn't know what we were getting into," he said when he first woke up and saw 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 mood left Mom's face like draining bathwater. "We reached into that box of Crackerjack, and you were the prize." Both arms stretched toward me from the gaping sleeves of his patient gown, like I was supposed to hug him for saying that. I did.

Mom and I sat in the waiting room while Pops got dressed and processed out. "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. Through the Women's Health Center, downtown Middleton."

Okay, I shoulda had some doubts years before. I don't look much like either one of them. Mom is as fair as country buttermilk, covered in orange freckles with rich auburn hair. And

people started calling Pops ‘Papa Smurf’ way before I came along. Maybe some inside joke I was never in on, but I guess because he looked like this old cartoon character. He wasn’t blue, of course, but short, with a build like that, and it paired up easy with our last name. Smurf McMurphy.

I was always one of the tallest girls at school with round brown eyes, raven hair, and what they call ‘olive’ skin. I had noticeable boobs and had to shave around the edge of my bikini bottom when I was eleven. Older guys got real interested before I was a teenager. When people would ask, Mom would say I looked just like the great aunt I was named after. I never met Aunt Delia.

Some 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. What he really wanted to talk about is another story, but with everything going on, the notion of ‘real parents’ never crossed my mind. For a long time after what Pops told me that day, it was hard to focus on anything else.

It wasn’t like, a conscious thing, but after I found out I didn’t think about my parents the same way. At first, I guess it kinda pissed me off. Then it all started to make sense. I belonged in another life, in another place.

Mom worked as a career counselor at the community college and knew some things. She had told me that, with my test scores and some financial aid, I could follow whatever professional path I wanted to pursue. For all I knew I carried the DNA to become a famous scientist or surgeon, physicist or astronaut, even. That wasn’t going to happen here, in the middle

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

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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 local clientele. We were sitting in the open garage one afternoon, dangling our legs from the work-truck tailgate. I realized for the first time I was a full head taller. The draft from the side door swirled the smells of porcelain, PVC pipe, and glue in a dewy mist around our 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. I looked into them on either side of that ski-slope nose and in spite of all his flaws, I loved that guy. "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 that I might have other plans.

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Brittany was my bestie since middle school and pretty and smart, like me. She was an academic superstar up until we were juniors. Her creepy brother got an engineering scholarship to the University of Florida. We 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, then started doing Kyle, and all that's a story for another time. But it sure ended our talks about being famous doctors or scientists.

Sometimes back then she'd go on service calls with Pops and me. 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 tapping with a wrench so he could identify the right pipe. We'd look through people's closets and dresser drawers while he maneuvered around down there in the crawl space. He was getting too old for all that hard work. While waiting for him to climb around an attic, we could learn a lot about customers just by going through shit in their medicine cabinets.

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I'd see Mrs. Hawthorne with the dogs in her front yard every day from the school bus ride home. We put on our cool new Nikes and walked eleven blocks across town. There was this huge budding maple tree across the street from her 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 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 a half hour later. She didn't see us watching as we sucked up the courage to cross the street. White, yipping fuzz balls orbited her ankles like stuffed, mechanical toys on a tether. We stepped through the wrought-iron gate, stuck open with rust, and took a few steps up the flagstone walk.

Our movement made her turn toward us. 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 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 down at the wrist in Britt’s direction. Then Brittany, swear to God, took her hand by the fingers and dropped in this awkward curtsy like on one of those lame, PBS shows. I always told her she played too much. This was serious business for me.

It didn’t come out like I rehearsed it. I blurted out phrases about me being adopted, her reputation for all the fine work at Women’s Health, and looking for information on biological parents. Did she remember my parents going through the process? 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 speaking. She looked over the top of our heads as she spoke, and sounded like the actress my parents watch on that 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.” I finished for her.

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

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

“Do you remember who gave her up?” The words came out stark and hard and ended with both of them looking at me. “Who brought her to you?” 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.” And that was it.

“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 her for her time, and were stepping toward the gate when Britt turned back with one more question.

“What did you mean, by, mixed couples?”

“Mixed as in the kind of folks who settled this town, with those who, shall I say, come through to work the harvest.”

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We were so excited that day we jogged most of the way until we were back in Britt’s dark bedroom at the computer. It all started to make sense to me. I now had footsteps to follow, maybe into a world-famous medical career.

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 none had anything to tie them back here to Middleton. Not that me or Britt gave 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 imagine. We even checked out online real-estate records but couldn’t get a good match going back a full ten years. I 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 our senior year coming up, there were a lot of other things going on. Britt’s brother would live 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 year, I was near the top ten percent of my class and with scholarship in mind, I 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 coulda 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 that Christmas Break, standing in Britt’s checkout line when I sensed something creeping up on my left shoulder. I caught a whiff like the mothballs people keep in old vanity cabinets and jumped after I turned to look. We hadn’t seen Mrs. Hawthorne since that conversation on her front steps. But there she was, leaning in so close and strange I almost dropped my Arizona Iced Tea. She 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 girls here together, it just came to me.” The secret mission was on again. “Cameron” was another one of those dead-white-male names going back to the town’s original settlers.

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, but all we saw out there 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. The age information seemed about right. Also listed for him was an apartment in Topeka and a business address in Orlando. We were pumped, finding 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 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 I called, every time I thought about it. It was early March when someone finally picked up the phone.

"Hullo?" he said. I'd practiced in my mind so many different ways that words came out mixed together, all around the question I hadn't asked. I stopped and took a deep breath.

"Are you there Dr. Cameron?"

"Yes." My blabbing hadn't scared him off yet and I thought it might be best to just come out with it.

"I'm looking for my real father and think you may be him." The conversation took off 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.” 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 Brittany the address he gave me was all it took for her to come up with a scam to get away. Our Spring Break was five days away. Britt’s mother was moved, teared-up even, at her thoughtful daughter’s wish to take me along to visit her brother at the U. of F. “We’ll surprise him,” Britt said. Her mother even gave us with some money and baked goods to take along. The college brochures my Mom had brought home helped convince Pops it wasn’t too late for me to visit a good campus.

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I’d never been that far south before, or out of the state, even. Those days before we left, we drove around town, tracking places we knew until we were comfortable with our smart-phone GPS. Most exciting was tapping in the directions and seeing our route mapped out from Middleton all the way to that street number on South Tamiami Trail.

The highway looked pretty much the same 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 didn’t want to spend another night on the road. We took turns driving while the other pulled up online images: palm trees and dolphins, clear green 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 couldn’t read her phone screen from the driver’s seat.

“It says here he’s connected with one of the biggest pill mills in the state. Can you say, ocean-side mansions and limos.”

I told her then like I’d say it now. I just wanted to meet him face-to-face. Not long after that, during a 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 twenty miles from you at a Wawa in Tampa.” I don’t know if I’ve ever been so nervous, those two times on the phone, waiting through those long pauses, not knowing what he would say next. I angled the phone off my ear so Britt could hear.

“That’s, uh, awesome girl. Stay on that road. It brings you right here. The main gate will be closed by now.” Eyes wide and leaning toward me, Britt silently mouthed the words, Main Gate! “So, go past it and turn into the service entrance. I’m in unit 13A.”

We counted down the street numbers, getting closer and closer and sitting at a stop light, 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. A wide sign lit up above the locked front gate read ‘Tropical Safari,’ in big, colored cartoon letters.

Gravel sounded under the tires as we turned down the service road. There was just enough light to 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 peanut shells. On the other side of the lane, noises from tall canvas-covered frames suggested large, moving creatures inside them.

Among the row of white mailbox poles we found 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 felt like there had been some mistake. I just couldn't explain why.

"We going in, or what?" Britt asked. I was too slow to answer, I guess. She had the door open and was up to the trailer, about to knock, before I shook some sense into myself and followed. The door opened and a wedge of light cast Britt in silhouette and me in shadow.

"Oh my freakin' God!" The man's mouth hung open with both hands up to his head, like the guy shouting in that famous European expressionist painting. He reached out to hug her. "You look just like your mother!"

"Hey, I'm Brittany." She stuck out a hand to shake. My 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 my hand, too. "Come in, come in. I want to hear everything about you."

The narrow room smelled of weed, gym socks, and beer. He turned 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 and talked quickly about how we found him and our trip to get there, trying to get around to questions I wanted to ask.

There was an overturned plastic crate as a coffee table between us. He lifted a half joint from the ashtray and, along with a plastic lighter, offered in our direction. Britt's face lit up at first, though when I cut my eyes hard at 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 after each time he spoke, as if some unpredictable game-changer could arrive at any moment.

"We thought you were a doctor." That's how direct Britt talked 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."

"So, what are you doing here? Tropical Safari?"

"Ensuring the animals are properly medicated." 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. I don't mean teardrop-running-down-the-cheek crying. Closer to toddler in a grocery cart bawling. It was so weird we stood and might have bolted, but he caught himself, waved his hands in the air, and pointed 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 for the next five minutes and told us. After school, he worked part-time

for his dad, doing inventory at that plant we saw shut down outside of town. Her family came up for temporary jobs early each year, staying in quarters on the factory compound, before time came to move on for prime farm work up 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.” Her brother was waving him out to the van at the end of the driveway. She 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 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 further questions.

Walking us out to the truck, he kept spilling details he could remember. That’s when he said my mother’s name and that, last he knew, they kept a family home in the Rio Grande Valley. He’d send the address when he found it. “Boxes in there I haven’t looked at since I landed here.” He hugged us both.

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 Delia, you can be anything you want. All in front of you. You don’t have to end up like this.” He pointed directly over his shoulder as if some unseen mass of troubles lay piled nearby in the dark. “I tried too hard to be as big a success as my Father.” His voice cracked and made me think he might start crying again.

“What’d he do? Britt asked. In the light 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 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.” We drove ten blocks toward nowhere in silence.

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Things work out. Not always like you thought, but they do. We made the story to our parents work by driving most of the night to her brother’s campus. We slept in the truck and saw him the next morning. He was surprised, of course, and upbeat until he freaked out over the decals on the truck windows and fuzzy trim Britt had glued to the dashboard. He got over it, though. As we left, he hugged us both and wet-kissed my ear.

In the almost four years since then, Britt got her GED and is working toward her Dental Assistant Certification. They started calling our community college a university and I saw her a lot on campus, finishing up my business degree. I’m taking online classes for my MBA.

That's where I looked into Chapter 11. I hadn't known how bad the recession hit Pops' business but reorganization seems to be working out. He's supervising three crews now and almost always home every day well before dark. We're done worrying about him pushing water heaters up flights of stairs. Maybe he's squeezed that big belly through his last crawl space.

The desk is in the middle of my office. The office is in the middle of the block, the middle of town, as always before. But, in the middle of the corkboard behind me is a photo from the *Ledger Herald* of us being awarded the Chamber of Commerce Trophy. The caption reads "New Small Business of the Year." I'm in the middle as president of Ortega-McMurphy Plumbing, LLC. Mom looks happy as ever on my left. Pops is on the other side, wearing that goofy grin, holding the prize.
