

You Are Here

I am running away. I stuff my best clothes: the green dress I made in home economics class, the jeans with the rainbow embroidered across the back pockets, my retainer, and my clock radio, the one Daddy got me for Christmas, into a paper grocery sack. Piggly Wiggly grins at me from the side of the bag with an unsavory glint in his eye. Daddy snores like a motorboat in the back bedroom as I close the front door behind me.

Conrad smokes in the car while I pack. I put my sack in the backseat and climb in the front. He releases the hand brake and lets the car roll down the hill. Once we're out of earshot, he pops the clutch and engages the engine. He flicks his cigarette butt out the window, and we drive away.

The house belongs to Conrad's brother. "Vacant rental," Conrad explains as he unlocks the front door, "just 'til we're on our feet." There's no furniture in the front room. Scuffed hardwood planks point to the far wall, making the room look long and narrow. Through the first door is a hallway, leading to one bedroom at either end with a bathroom in between. There are no curtains on the windows, but there's a bed in the bedroom on the left. It's made up with dowdy flowered sheets and pillowcases, but no blanket or bedspread.

There's no TV, no phone, no chairs or a dresser. Just the bed. I ask why there's no other furniture and he says, "What'd you expect, a goddamn villa in Buenos Aeries?" He smirks and sidles up against me. "What more do you need?"

I put my sack down just inside the bedroom door. He's right behind me, arms around my waist, nuzzling my hair and breathing on my neck. One hand moves up my front and the other moves down. I lay my forearm against the doorjamb for support as he pulls my jeans down from

behind. He steers me into the room. I'm down to knee socks and cotton panties. I follow his lead as he sits me on the edge of the bed.

His clothes land in a heap on the floor and he stands in the middle of the room. He looks down at his erection and then up at me. The proud look on his face implies that this strange, bobbing extension must be some rare and monumental achievement on his part. He steps forward, puts his hands on my shoulders, and then I'm on my back. Conrad hovers over me, closer and closer. I feel sharp, sharp, pressure, pressure and I hope that by doing this, by giving him this part of myself, he will love me in return.

He says it. He says he loves me; that we're meant for each other. He punctuates his words with his hips over and over, "Now. You're. Mine. Now. You're. Mine." I look at his silhouette above me, torso hyper-extended, supported by outstretched arms. I try not to think about how this image, backlit against the naked window, suddenly reminds me of a bull seal, staking its territory on a beach in some PBS documentary.

I've done it. Now I'm his. Now he'll love me.

He goes to work the next day, leaving me alone. I take a bath, dry my hair, sit on the bed. My clock radio sits on the bedroom floor. I listen to Eddie Rabbitt, George Jones, and the Statler Brothers. I want to put my clothes away, but Conrad's washable slacks and short-sleeve dress shirts occupy all the hangers in the closet.

The cupboards are empty. No glasses, no dishes, no silverware. By two o'clock I'm so thirsty that I gulp water from the tap in the kitchen. My hair gets wet again as it dangles into the sink. Strands of it start to follow the water in a circle down the drain.

The running water puts me in mind of the last summer in the house on Sanger Lane. My sister and her friends run and squeal in the backyard, their adolescent bodies tan and skinny in their halter-tops and cut-offs. I am as naked as a jaybird, my pink preschool belly round and

proud, as I chase the big girls with the garden hose. It's hot; all this chasing is thirsty work, and I pause to take a drink from the hose. Daddy's on the porch with his camera taking pictures of the wet girls. He turns and catches me at just the right moment, mouth open, about to intercept the cold arc of well water. Droplets of water catch the light. The image is clean, pure, and simple.

Daddy doesn't go back to work at the high school in the fall and soon after that the big house on Sanger Lane isn't ours anymore. We move into a little house with a cinder block foundation. The front porch is a cement slab and the steps have sharp corners. Mama and Daddy's bed takes up the whole back bedroom, and my sister and I sister share the front bedroom. The inside of the house is mustard yellow, floor to ceiling. My sister stacks boxes in the corner of the front room as we move in. She looks around and says they must've been having a sale on puke yellow at the paint store and Daddy says shut up.

Mama sells two of her horses, and the remaining two can't live at the new house. They stay in a rented pasture on the edge of town. She drives three miles down a dirt road every day after work to feed them. Daddy gripes about the cost of gas, feed, and pasture rent, but never lifts a finger to help.

Daddy opens a photography shop with a loan from my grandmother, and spends his days in a darkroom wallpapered with images of naked women. Years later I ask why he stopped teaching at the high school. He says because a girl a lie told about him.

Mama works less and less, starts calling in to ask for a substitute to cover in her classroom. She's hungry, but everything she eats makes her writhe in misery and run for the bathroom. There are frequent trips to the doctor and overnight stays at the hospital for tests. I overhear conversations about a surgery, an ostomy bag, and Daddy says it's repulsive. Mama's

diet becomes bland and colorless, until she subsists on Gerber baby meats smeared across white bread.

She spends so much time in bed that Daddy moves my twin bed into the front room so that she can look at television. The bed is continuously occupied; Mama has the day shift, and I take over at bedtime. After a few weeks of this arrangement, Mama returns to the hospital. The bed stays in the front room, but at least I don't have to share.

It's hot and raining when I get out of school that day. I skip down the hill that last block, enjoying how the rain cuts the heat and soaks through my school clothes. I stop when I notice my sister's car parked on the curb behind Daddy's. She moved away the week after she graduated from high school; got married to a boy from town. She and Daddy are both sitting in the front room when I come in. She's on the green swivel chair and he's sitting in the vinyl recliner. My bed is still crammed into the corner, waiting for Mama to return.

Daddy says, "Sit down, honey, we've got something to tell you." I know something's wrong because he never calls me honey. He always calls me stinky. I sit on the foot of the bed, as close to my sister as I can get. She puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Mama died this afternoon," she says. As I slide off the edge of the bed she adds, "You know she was real sick. She shoulda had that surgery a long time ago." My head lands in her lap and her fingers clutch at my hair.

Daddy clears his throat. "This wasn't unexpected, you know," he says. "Nothing to brood over." I get a sudden picture in my head, an image of a broody hen, her red feathered body hunkered over a clutch of yellow chicks, and I wonder at his choice of words. "You want to come over here and sit with me?" he asks. Without looking up, I shake my head no, and bury my face in my sister's skirt.

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I'm surprised when Leona first writes to me. She is a grownup friend of my mother, and now my mother's dead. I'm ten years old. Why would she write to me? It doesn't matter why because her letter thrills me and I write back about school, how much I miss the horses, how Daddy says he took Halloween and all her kittens to a nice pet shop where they'll be sure to find good homes. I'm even more surprised when, after a few letters are exchanged, Leona and Bobby invite me to visit. Daddy drives three hours to drop me off after school lets out for the summer. I'm nervous, happy, and excited.

Leona and Bobby don't have any children. They say they never wanted any. I ask Leona why they want me around. She grins, pats my arm, and says, "Darlin', you were born an adult."

I stay a whole month on Leona's ranch. I feed goats, ride horses, gather chicken eggs. Leona lets one hen keep her eggs. I steer clear of her nest box for fear of getting pecked. She spreads her wings over her new chicks, glowering at me as I collect eggs from other nests. Leona and Bobby say I'm a good ranch hand and invite me to come back next year.

Each summer is more exciting than the last. During my third visit, I break a horse to ride under Leona's guidance. Pacer is a pretty little bay roan with a star on her forehead. She's extra tame because Leona bottle-fed her after her mother died. I get Pacer used to the feel of a saddle and a hackamore. I lower her startle point by fanning her legs with a saddle blanket as she stands tethered to a fencepost. Finally I'm in the saddle, and Pacer is following my lead, neck reining, making figure eights. The following year I ride Pacer in a competitive trail ride. Leona tells all the other riders, "She broke this horse herself! Now tell me, didn't she do a bang-up job?"

On the way home from the ride, we sit three abreast on the bench seat of the pickup truck. Bobby reaches for the stick shift and accidentally grabs Leona's knee. She squeals and pokes him in the ribs. They draw closer to each other, despite the heat, exchanging some whispered tenderness that only sweethearts share. Lulu, their little black dog, straddles my lap as she leans

out the window, sniffing the warm piney air of the east Texas evening. I stroke her hair, smell the sweet air, and I feel like I'm part of something good.

My best friend, Melanie McNeely, still lives at the end of Sanger Lane. I can see my old house from her front yard. The pasture where our horses used to live has been subdivided into six lots. The two-story house where I spent my first five years looks like the odd-man-out against the red brick rectangles that have cropped up around it.

I go to a movie with Melanie one Friday night. We're sophomores now, old enough to go unattended. Her mom leans across the front seat when she drops us off, calling "I'll pick you up here, right here, at 9:45," before driving away.

The movie's sold out, so we decide to cruise the mall across the parking lot until it's time to be picked up. We buy Cokes and Mrs. Fields cookies. Sugar surges through our veins as we traipse around, giddy with unexpected independence. At the mall directory we look at the map, at the red dot indicating our whereabouts. We laugh and poke fingers at each other, saying, "You are here. No, no, here!"

We find Conrad working alone in a store that sells ceiling fans and fireplace accessories. The walls are lined with mock-ups of fireplaces showcasing all the different glass doors and sets of tools. Each mantel holds a box of 12-inch matches and an oil lamp. Bentwood rockers and footrests are arranged in a cozy display in the middle of the store.

He's only too happy to see the two of us; engages us in playful, flirtatious banter. He's wearing slacks and dress shoes, not the Wranglers and Justin Ropers all the boys at school wear. He seems sophisticated and grown up. The conversation turns to who's left-handed and who's right-handed. Melanie is ambidextrous, and, on the back of a voided sales slip, shows off her ability to sign her name with both hands. He's left-handed, and his signature slopes to the left. I'm right-handed, and proud of the curvy loops I incorporate in my full name, just below his.

I sleep over at Melanie's after we're picked up from the theater parking lot. Her parents offer us ice cream when we get home and ask how we liked the movie. We tell them we liked it fine and giggle at each other over our double scoops and secrets.

There's a phone call the next morning for Melanie, and her mom has an odd look on her face as she hands over the receiver. Melanie says "Hello?" and her mouth falls open. "It's him!" Melanie mouths at me, eyes wide and shiny. I ask who and she stage whispers, "You know, Conrad, from last night!"

I slump down on the floor at the top of the stairs while she sits at the telephone table on the landing, chit-chatting with Conrad. He had both of our last names on that sales slip. He could've looked up either one of us in that skinny slip of a local phone directory. Of course, he would call her. Melanie, with her long, glossy black hair. Melanie, with her porcelain skin and blue eyes. I study her portrait hanging in the stairwell. Mr. McNeely hired Daddy to take it when she was five. She's dressed as an angel, gazing up toward some rapturous point in the distance. That portrait won a local photo contest. Her father sold it to a greeting card company and they made it into a Christmas card. Of course, Conrad would call her.

Melanie's father puffs up the stairs onto the landing. He approaches his daughter, hand extended. Without a word, she hands him the receiver. "This is Mr. McNeely, who's calling?" Melanie rolls her eyes. "And how did you meet my daughter?" She covers her face with her hands. "Are you in school?" Her head sinks forward into her lap. "How old are you, exactly?" She covers the back of her head with her hands. "Now you listen, don't you call here again. A man your age has no business calling up young girls." He bangs the receiver into its cradle.

Melanie is grounded for lying about not going to the movie.

Conrad calls my house the next day. He drives out to the house, meets Daddy, visits for a while. He kisses me when he leaves. His lips are dry and warm and he tastes of smoke and escape.

A month or two later, I ask Daddy what he thinks of Conrad. We're driving home from grocery shopping in town. Daddy says, "Well, he sure beats the hell outta that goat-roper you ran around with last year." Without taking his eyes off the road he adds, "Keep in mind, big girls like you can't be too choosy."

Conrad's finally home from work and I'm starving. He says it's a special night and wants to go out. Collier's Bar-B-Q has all-you-can-eat, and the drink refills are free. I don't realize how thirsty I am until the Coca-Cola wets my tongue. Pretty soon I'm on my third glass and Conrad says, "That's not diet, you know."

"You're gonna hafta get a job." Barbequed beef and calf fries are piled high on his plate. "You can work at the store with me. I know the manager." Conrad laughs at his own joke. He is the manager. He wants me to wear the green dress tomorrow.

Conrad's full-time salesperson, Sandra, is waiting outside the store when we arrive the next morning. I shake her skinny hand and notice the gap between her front teeth. She gives me the stink-eye as Conrad turns the key and the gate clatters up, disappearing into the ceiling. Other store managers are going through the same motions, raising gates, flipping on neon signs. A mall security guard walks his beat, making sure all the stores are opening on time.

Conrad teaches me how to work the cash register. It's an old manual model, just a place to put money. He shows me a calculator that's glued to the counter. "Don't do any math in your head. I don't want the company getting gypped 'cause of you giving out the wrong change." I

wonder how he's going to change the battery in that calculator without breaking it. He hands me a feather duster.

Sandra goes to lunch after a couple of hours and Conrad beckons to me from the back room. Says he has to show me something. The walls are lined with large boxes of back stock, all marked "Made in China." He puts his hands around my waist and lifts me up onto a box behind you. He's kissing me, kneading my chest with one hand, pressing my hand against his crotch with the other. The cardboard box is starting to crumple under me, my head bumps against the wall, and he's rumpling my green dress.

I'm relieved when a tentative voice says from the doorway, "Hello? Anybody home?" Conrad jerks backwards, flushed in the face, cramming his shirt back into his pants. The tiny housewife just needs "some of them extra-long matches," and doesn't know where to put her eyes when he emerges into the display area with his protruding pants front. As he rings up the sale, I slip up front and grab the duster. When tries to lure me back I refuse. I say it's unprofessional.

"Oh, so you're a professional now? I tell you what, if you *were* a "professional," you'd come back here and do what I want!"

Daddy telephones the store a few days later. I speak on the phone behind the front counter while Conrad listens in on the extension in the back room. Daddy wonders where I've been, says the school secretary called to see why I've been absent and he didn't know what to tell her. I tell him I'm at Conrad's brother's house, and I don't want to come back. "Why didn't you tell me? Just sneakin' off in the middle of the night..." Daddy's voice trails off. I wish I could say that whenever I tried to talk to him before, he just told me to shut up and change the channel, so I'd decided not to bother. I wish I could say that I didn't like the way he'd been looking at me lately, that it just wasn't right. Instead I say that I don't know; I just wasn't happy

anymore. “You happy now?” he asks, and I say I guess so. “Well, you listen here, girlie-girl, shacking up isn’t gonna get you anything but knocked up. Call me in nine months, tell me how happy you are then.”

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Conrad makes Sandra the assistant manager. They start leaving me alone in the store while they have lunch together to “discuss business strategies.” I stay in the front of the store, help customers the best I can, show them how you can whack a tempered glass fireplace door with a poker and not break the glass. One day I miss and whack the doorframe instead, making a big ding in the brass. I tell Conrad a customer did it.

I go to lunch by myself after they get back. As I walk through the mall toward Chick-fil-A, I wave at some of the merchants I’ve become familiar with. On one occasion, the manager of Richman Brothers falls into step with me, smiling and clean in his business suit. “Well, hello, pretty miss!” His voice is smooth. He has small square teeth. “I see you walk by every day. My name is Buck. Want some company?” I don’t know if I want to say yes, but I don’t know how to say no.

So I sit at the Formica table as he orders lunch for us both. Not just a small order of fries and a cup of water like I usually have. He gets me a chicken breast sandwich, a Coke, and an order of waffle fries. I haven’t been so full in days. He asks me questions, is amazed that someone as delicate as me, yes, he says delicate, has participated in something as rough as competitive trail riding.

I tell him about my summers on Leona’s ranch, how she and Bobby invited me to visit them each summer after my mother died. Buck interprets my sudden lapse into silence as a private moment of mourning. “Bless your heart,” he says, respectfully lowering his eyes. In a way he’s right. I am mourning, but not for the loss of my mother. That wound is old and desensitized. I’ve just realized that I won’t be going to the ranch this summer.

Conrad goes to lunch at two on Sundays. Sandra has the day off and I like having the store to myself. The customers are shopping on their way home from church, dressed up and full of Christian kindness. They compliment my green dress and say, “Well, I’ll be,” when I blush and admit that I made it myself. I smile and ring up little sales, trying to ignore the fact that I’m hungry and can’t leave the storefront unattended.

At six o’clock all the other stores roll down their gates and turn off their signs, but Conrad’s not back yet and I don’t have a key. I switch off the sign and turn off half the lights in the store. A mall security guard wanders in. He has an aluminum badge pinned to his polyester uniform. “You better get your gate down, girl. Closing time.” I explain that the manager’s gone and I don’t have a key. I shrug and splay my fingers out at my sides to fully communicate my sense of helplessness

Buck strolls by on his way out and offers to wait with me a little while. I sit with him on the bench outside the store; tell the security guard that I’m sure Conrad will be back shortly. My stomach growls audibly.

“I’ll be right back,” Buck says, and hurries away, smiling. He leaves his suit coat on the bench. The fabric looks smooth and refined. I run my fingers over the material and wonder what it’s made of. Buck returns almost instantly, a Chick-fil-A soft-serve cone in each hand. “Thought I could talk Earl into a couple of cones! He was just leaving, but I told him one was for you, so he said okay.”

I sit with Buck eating ice cream. He’s laughing, wiping tears from his eyes with his handkerchief, at the description of my last summer trail ride, the one when Pacer spooked and started hopping sideways off the trail. He’s amazed that I managed to hold my seat, says I’m full of surprises.

We sit on the bench for forty-five minutes. Buck shows me how the seamstress at Richman Brothers does the alterations on the suit coats. He's turned his own jacket inside out to show off the quality of her workmanship. I'm squinting at the almost invisible slipstitches that anchor the lining to the hem. We don't hear Conrad approach.

"What the fuck you think you're doin' with my old lady?"

"Beg pardon?" Buck stands up so fast that his knees crack. "You the manager of this store? We've been waiting for you for quite some time."

"Yeah, well I'm here now." Conrad steps forward, inches from Buck's face. He jabs his index finger in my face. "And you can forget about her, she's mine."

Buck looks down at me on the bench. "You alright?" I nod, but my eyes are overflowing. He hands me his handkerchief, drapes his inside-out jacket over his arm and hurries away. Conrad flips him off when he glances back over his shoulder.

Conrad glares at me as the gate rattles down its tracks. He's left the interior lights on in the store. "Can't believe that perv, sniffing around you like that. He's twice your age. Hell, he's twice my age!"

I point out that Conrad is half again my age, and he replies, "Yeah, well, age isn't everything."

I ask where he's been all this time. "Had to run some papers over to Sandy, uh, Sandra's house. You know she has an air hockey table? Guess I lost track a time." I want to point out that he'd left the store empty-handed, and that five hours is a long time to play air hockey, but I think better of.

Conrad pulls into Collier's on the way out of the mall parking lot. He stops here every Sunday. I can't stand to look at another pile of calf fries. I tell him I'm not really hungry.

"What, your new boyfriend buy you dinner? What'd you have to trade for that?" I say that Buck

doesn't want anything from me. Conrad yanks up the handbrake, bringing the car to a sudden crooked stop in a parking space. "You are some kinda looloo, you know that? You think he's hanging around for your conversational skills? He just wants to get in your pants and you're too dumb to know it. You can come in, you can wait in the car, you can go fuck yourself for all I care. I'm hungry." He gets out of the car and I observe, for the first time, that his pants don't fit properly. The side pockets of his slacks gape open, showing the lining, and the center back seam shows signs of distress. I wonder why it took me so long to notice.

I sit in the car. I get out of the car. I get back in. Finally, I shake all the coins out of my handbag, grope under the seats for any strays, and head for a payphone.

The first thing Daddy asks is, "When are you due?" I roll my eyes, tell him I'm not pregnant, but I am wondering if I've made a mistake. "About time you came to your senses. I guess you want to come home?"

I think about what he calls home. Cracked windows fixed with masking tape. Cockroaches that scatter in all directions when the kitchen light turns on. Daddy's constant presence, now that he's retired, lounging in his underpants on the twin bed that still dominates the front room. Living on food stamps and mama's teacher retirement benefits. I think of Daddy's silhouette in the frame of my bedroom door when I wake sometimes at night. I think about the suggestive comments I'd get from the boys if I went back to school. I say I don't know what to do and Daddy says "Well, you made your own bed" and hangs up the phone.

Conrad and Sandra are at lunch when the district manager shows up the next day. He hefts his briefcase onto the counter and says, "You must be the little girlfriend, or whatever. I've heard about you." He gives me a knowing look. He's taken over the store.

Conrad bristles and blusters when he gets back, giving excuses like engine trouble and flat tires for all the times he's opened the store late. He blames last night's closing time debacle

on me, saying I should've reminded him to leave the gate key before he left the store. He has a harder time explaining why the cash drawer is sixty-five dollars short. He says it was a cash refund, but fails to produce the appropriate paperwork or the returned merchandise. He empties his pockets into the register, hands over his keys, and the district manager escorts us both out of the store.

We sit on opposite ends of a bench next to the mall directory. I ask him if he has a handkerchief. "Oh, quit crying, you dumb cunt," he barks, then leans back and lets out a loud belch that echoes up and down the broad corridor. Heads turn on all sides and I've never been more ashamed in my life. I wish I could be somewhere else. Anywhere but here.

The next morning I lock myself in the bathroom and tell Conrad I'm sick. I'm too sick to go look for a job, too sick to take him up on his offer to stay home "sick" with me. I add authenticity to my claim by running water and making retching noises. He hollers, "God damn it, you better not have got yourself pregnant! That's the last thing I need!" After a while he gives up. The front door slams as he leaves.

I am going home. I stuff my best clothes: the green dress I made in home economics class, the jeans with the rainbow embroidered across the back pockets, my retainer, and my clock radio, the one Daddy got me for Christmas, into a paper grocery sack. Piggly Wiggly smiles from the side of the bag and wears his little butcher's cap at a jaunty angle.

I walk down the road with my possessions clutched against my chest. There's a payphone on the corner in front of the Dairy Queen. I place a collect call and then go inside. After I've sat in a booth for half an hour, the cashier leaves her station and approaches the table.

"You can't just sit here all day, you know. You gotta order something."

The least expensive item on the menu is a 59¢ soft serve cone. I dig through my purse and search my pockets, scattering the coins on the table in front of me, and come up with 57¢. The cashier rolls her eyes and I start to cry. Not the quiet, controlled cry I'd perfected to keep Daddy from hollering, "I'll give you something to cry about," but a helpless wailing that comes from somewhere I didn't know about until just now. Everything I've lost, everything I never had to begin with, wells up inside me and I can't stop sobbing.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't cry like that." The cashier starts to panic as customers turn to stare. "I tell you what, you keep your money." She scurries behind the counter and returns with a plastic-wrapped confection. "Here's a chocolate dipped banana. Nobody ever orders them anyhow."

Three hours later Leona sweeps through the door of the Dairy Queen. Her red hair is combed away from her face in feathery wings like those lady detectives on TV. She's wearing her favorite jacket, made of rust-colored suede with a fringe along the sleeves. I stand up to greet her and she exclaims, "Good heavens, child, you're so thin!" She gathers me into her arms, surrounding me with the familiar and comforting scents of leather, hay, and hairspray.

Lulu waits on the seat of the truck, wagging from nose to tail. The hair around her muzzle is starting to go gray. I climb in beside her, put my paper sack between my feet and close the door. She jumps into my lap and I embrace her. She licks my face and loves me and wants nothing in return.