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Little Miss Bird-in-Hand

Abstract

The girls of the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant instantly understood that Contestant Twelve was different, though they could not be certain why. To begin with, her parents were different from theirs. They were older. They did not preen their daughter like tropical birds. When they dropped her off at the dressing room, they lingered with stiff limbs in the doorway as though their coats were stuffed with newspaper and straw. The girl waved at them and smiled, gently shoos them off. After a moment they turned away, two hunks of stale putty shuffling down the hall, leaving their daughter alone with the other girls. Arabella Tornabene spoke first because Arabella Tornabene always spoke first.

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Little Miss Bird-in-Hand

Fiction by Annie Bilancini

2013 BOOTH STORY PRIZE RUNNER-UP

Of a shade intermediate between black and white

The girls of the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant instantly understood that Contestant Twelve was different, though they could not be certain why. To begin with, her parents were different from theirs. They were older. They did not preen their daughter like tropical birds. When they dropped her off at the dressing room, they lingered with stiff limbs in the doorway as though their coats were stuffed with newspaper and straw. The girl waved at them and smiled, gently shooing them off. After a moment they turned away, two hunks of stale putty shuffling down the hall, leaving their daughter alone with the other girls. Arabella Tornabene spoke first because Arabella Tornabene always spoke first.

“Girl, your parents are weird.” The girls eyed Contestant Twelve as she sat at her dressing mirror and arranged the contents of her toiletry bag on the table: a curling iron, pink lipstick, hairspray, needle nose pliers, a vial of glitter. She turned and smiled the same gentle smile she’d offered her parents.

“They’re engineers,” she said. Junie-Rae Wright scoffed, but the girls all knew Junie-Rae didn’t know what the word *engineer* meant.

“My dad is a salesman,” Arabella said proudly.

“What does he sell?” asked Contestant Twelve. Arabella considered her question, and a smirk bloomed on her face.

“Stuff your family probably can’t afford,” she said triumphantly. But Contestant Twelve’s congenial expression didn’t fade. The girls all leaned forward, expectant.

“That’s okay. My parents make everything we need anyway,” she said. Arabella’s mouth slackened like an old tire. The girl twisted the top off her tube of lipstick and turned back to the mirror. “My name is Gray,” she said to the reflections of the other girls in her mirror, “It’s nice to meet you all.”

Ms. Bondurant’s maternal instincts kick in

Glenna Bondurant, the pageant director, asked the girls to refer to her as Mama B. She told the girls she wanted them to think of her as a second mother during their time in the pageant (or only mother, since DeeDee Wessel-Fink had two fathers and Shira Whiteagle’s mother had been killed in a car accident seven years back). To Mama B every girl was a winner, and she wanted them all to feel special despite the fact that only one girl could be crowned Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County, and the fact that this distinction might indicate that one girl was better than the rest and therefore more special; so special, in fact, that this particular girl was awarded a crown with real crystals and a \$3,000 scholarship from Georgette Von George’s Tailored Fashions, the premiere fashion warehouse in all of Bird-in-Hand County.

No, in Mama B’s eyes, all the girls were equal, special.

The Tarkington Twins and the porousness of identity

Because they are identical twins, Charlene and Darlene Tarkington (contestants number four and five, respectively) have the luxury of an emotional and intellectual connection that most other adolescent girls cannot possess. They shared the same egg and the same placenta, which put them at a high risk for complications in utero, as well as during their mother’s twenty-six hour labor. But the danger they faced before they could even form memories created an indefatigable bond between them.

In line with popular perception, they can, in fact, predict what the other will say. They have and often do finish each other’s sentences. They menstruate at the same time.

They suffer migraines simultaneously. They often fall into step when walking together. Their heart rate is frequently synchronized. They're fairly certain they've involuntarily engaged in telepathy with one another. It's a rather freaky business, but they are just that in tune.

The pranks started when they were very young. In order to tell her identical daughters apart, Mary-Margaret Tarkington would color code the twins: pink for Charlene and purple for Darlene. Every clothing article was coded from underwear to hair ties. The shenanigans started small. Charlene would wear Darlene's lavender socks. Darlene would don Charlene's fuchsia headband. But after a time the switching grew bolder, more sinister, and the girls would completely switch places, purposefully deceiving their parents. They'd switch for weeks at a time, thrilled by the opportunity to play a different role. And their parents could never tell, which made it all the more exhilarating. For such a harmless, controllable pleasure, the high was indescribable. They continued to switch for years, learning to answer to either name, to play either part, to be either girl.

Years later when the twins are fifteen, their parents will divorce and mutually decide it will be good for the girls to function separately at times, so on alternating weekends the girls are split between the parents. It will be at this point that the twins come to a horrifying realization: they no longer actually know who is who. Charlene might be Darlene. Darlene could be Charlene. They will live their entire lives never truly knowing which twin they actually are.

*Under the glowing spotlights of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier
Lodge main stage*

The girls lined up and waved to the cheering crowd as music from the five-disc CD changer and stereo system swelled. The Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant had officially begun. Colored strobe lights flashed and a smoke machine wheezed wet fog onto the stage and into the first few rows of the audience. When the music and the fog died down, Griff Klinghorn Jr., the master of ceremonies, walked to the center of the main stage. The rubber souls of his patent leather brogues squeaked on the waxed wooden stage. When he reached the center, he paused, his body burnished and still as marble. Then, slowly, reverently, he brought a silver microphone to his smooth-shaven chin. A breath in. And.

“Welcome!” he intoned, “Welcome one and all to the 66th annual Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant and Scholarship Competition!” The crowd roared. Griff Klinghorn Jr. outstretched his arms and leaned ever so slightly into their cheers. “This

night is about celebrating the best and brightest our humble county has to offer. This night is about our girls, the future of Bird-in-Hand, the future of America!” The room erupted again. Parents, grandparents, generations of Bird-in-Hand county were packed into the Lodge assembly hall. Twelve thirteen-year-old girls stood before them bedecked in glittering gowns and kitten heels, radiant with youthful effervescence. The girl called Gray stood at the far left of the line beaming happily. The lights of the spotlight shone bright and hot on her face, and the shutters of her eyes dilated till her irises were delicate copper rings. It was a lovely day to be a little miss.

A Little Miss engages in chromatic complexity

Here’s something. The voice, like any acoustic instrument, has its own special chambers for resonating the tone of a vocally produced sound. Once the tone is produced through the vibration of vocal cords, it moves in and through the open resonating chambers, activating the four primary resonances: the chest, the mouth, the nasal mask, and the head.

To aid in understanding this occurrence metaphorically, one might think of these various resonances as vocal colors that exist in a continuous spectrum, from dark or “chest resonance” to light or “head/nasal resonance.” The objective in singing is to have command of all the colors of this resonant spectrum. This command allows the singer a greater range of emotional phrasing and creates a tone that is pleasing to both singer and listener.

Imagine now, how a young girl formally diagnosed with sound to color synesthesia might have experienced this phenomenon as twelve female voices (ranging from contralto to coloratura soprano) vibrated in unison and filled the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge assembly hall with sound.

Sweetie Dillinger, contestant seven, watched the assembly hall explode with color as the contestants sang the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County pageant-opening anthem. Technicolor swirled from each girl’s mouth and pirouetted into the crowd. The room shifted and swayed as the hues changed gradient, pulsing like a kaleidoscope. Sweetie mutely mouthed the lyrics so she could focus on the lilts from indigo to chartreuse, orange to emerald.

At the other end of the stage, Sweetie noticed a brilliant red bubbling from Contestant Twelve, the newest girl, Gray. The sound rushed up like oxygen-rich blood rising from a wound and spilled onto the stage. It covered the floor like soft petals. At the

end of the song, Sweetie leaned down and wiped her hand on the stage floor. Nothing there. She giggled blue and green.

“If I could change the world in one small way...”

ARABELLA TORNABENE: I would make sure Little Miss Bird-In-Hand County continues to provide Bird-In-Hand County youths with opportunities for scholarships, as well as social and moral advancement.

CLEM SALTHOUSE: I would rescue stray dogs and cats or any animal that needed to be rescued. Baby birds, wounded rabbits or squirrels, motherless deer babies. Any baby animal, really.

JUNIE-RAE WRIGHT: I would probably try to hold doors open for old people or, like, people in wheel chairs. You know, people with needs.

DARLENE TARKINGTON: I would recycle more.

CHARLENE TARKINGTON: I would recycle more.

REENA DAWKINS: I would teach little kids to play instruments. Any instrument they wanted. Even the triangle.

SWEETIE DILLINGER: [Giggles]

ESTHER GLIN: I would encourage physical fitness among our county’s most sedentary citizens.

SHIRA WHITEEAGLE: I would help the poor by setting up a monthly food drive.

KATIE DUCKWORTH: I would set up a tutoring service for young girls.

DEEDEE WESSEL-FINK: I wouldn’t...because I’d change it in a *big* way.

GRAY LIGHTLY: I would build more people that could go out and help those who are lonely or sick or afraid.

GRIFF KLINGHORN JR.: ...Build? Do you mean hire?

On branches of the Tornabene family tree

Arabella Tornabene's great-great-grandmother, Clothilde Cloutier was a storied dancer. From burlesque to ballet, Clothilde could do it all. They called her the White Sylph, and she danced her way to America in 1924. She married three times, unhappily, the third time to Patricio Tornabene, the man who captured her for good. They had nine children, and her fourth son, Giancarlo, was Arabella's great-grandfather. None of the Tornabene children knew of their mother's past life. To them, Clothilde was the tired woman who cooked their food, drew their baths, and kissed their foreheads before bed. They never knew that their mother loved her children less than she loved dancing. The morning of the day Clothilde died, she tried to put on her favorite point shoes but they no longer fit. She was buried with her shoes and her secrets.

The Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Swimsuit Competition: a logistical record

9 one-piece suits
3 bikinis
437 polka dots
91 stripes
120 painted toenails
1 undiagnosed heart murmur
1 pair of glasses
2 sets of contact lenses
4 sets of shaved legs
1 set of identical twins
3 mouths full of braces
2 cases of scoliosis
206 titanium die-cast bone replicants
804 screws
37 bolts
160 aluminum pulleys
1 autonomous kinetic energy cell
12 glistening, Vaseline-toothed smiles

Reena Dawkins plays the trumpet for her Talent and the Glory of the Lord

Reena Dawkins loved music in a way that made it impossible for her to accept her lack of natural musical talent. She was tone deaf but determined. Her mother was the

kind of woman who loved her children so ruthlessly, she was willing to pay the local music teacher \$75 dollars extra just so her dogged daughter could buzz air into that brass noisemaker in the company of someone who truly understood just how hopeless Reena really was.

The morning of the pageant Reena shined her trumpet with a care and attention that bordered on evangelic. In the moments just before she went on stage, the odd, quiet girl, Gray, tapped Reena's shoulder and told her the instrument was some of the most beautiful metalwork she'd ever seen. Reena smiled in gratitude but held her trumpet tight against the sequined lapels of the jumpsuit her mother had sewn for this very day. This was a competition after all. Mama B strode over, clipboard pressed to her chest like a strange vestigial wing, and gently shoed Gray to the dressing room. She whispered hoarsely for Reena to take her mark. It was time.

When Reena walked on stage it all felt right. Her costume, her polished trumpet, her painted fingernails, her tightly curled hair, everything was ready. Her name was announced, and she stood at attention before the crowd. This was her moment to show the world what she'd been working for. She lifted the shining brass to her face and wet her lips. She squinched her eyes shut, inhaled. She blew her sweet breath into the mouthpiece, and for seven and a half minutes, God's music was made.

The pageant judges tell two truths and a lie

Millard Needlebauer:

Is a linesman for the Asteroid Fire Illuminating Company

Is currently trying his hand at online dating for the first time

Is happiest off the ground, high above the earth and breathing the air that no one else breathes

Rita Rippleton:

Is a high school principal

Is a happily devoted wife

Is not DeeDee Wessel-Fink's egg donor

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Elmo Fleet:

Is a talented local artist

Is allergic to shellfish

Isn't entirely sure why he is here

Critical study of the pageant system by local scholar yields controversial results

Monday, April 4th

By Phil Ungland

BIRD-IN-HAND – Dr. Sally Duckworth not only believes that the Bird-in-Hand County Little Miss Pageant and Scholarship Competition is harmful to its participants, she has proof. For the last decade, Dr. Duckworth, a sociologist at the nearby state research university, has been conducting a study, gathering data from pageant participants around the country. Three hundred former pageant winners were interviewed, as well as three hundred females who had never participated in a beauty pageant competition. They were evaluated and compared in categories such as body mass index, self-esteem, maternal relationships, hygienic routines, and overall bodily perception and satisfaction.

In general, Dr. Duckworth's study (conducted with the help of graduate students at the nearby state research university) found that those females who competed in beauty pageants had stunted corporal perception and satisfaction, greater impulse dysregulation, and higher incidences of trust issues with both humans and animals.

But not everyone is so sure Dr. Duckworth's study reveals the truth.

"I participated in eleven pageants before I was 18 and I won four of them," says Eureka Shepherd-St. Regis of Lionsrigdge. "I have an incredible life, incredible kids, an incredible husband. Even my nanny is incredible. Everything about Eureka Shepherd-St. Regis is incredible." You can find out more about this incredible life at Ms. Shepherd-St. Regis's blog, *Incredible Eureka!*

However, Dr. Duckworth is not so easily shaken. She insists that though the results to any study will have its outliers, the outlook for pageant girls is nearly always grim.

"It's a real jungle out there," says Duckworth, "These pageants show just how far we haven't come as a society. Something needs to be done."

When asked why she'll allow her daughter, Katie, 13, to participate in the upcoming Little Miss Pageant, Dr. Duckworth responded before promptly ending the interview, "My daughter made a choice that we'll both have to live with, but I love her. What can you do?"

Mr. and Mrs. Lightly build a family

When Gray Lightly took the stage to show the pageant audience her talents, her parents, Stan and Mabel Lightly, couldn't help but think about how far their daughter had come. The pale girl on stage getting ready to reveal a science project she'd been working on was the product of years of tireless labor and research.

Mabel Lightly née Lipsheim was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was thirty, two years before she met and married Stan Lightly, a fellow graduate student of bioengineering at the state research university. Her appetite had disappeared and her pelvis began to feel tender and stone heavy. The doctor told her they had to move quickly. Like all things in her life, Mabel Lipsheim approached her diagnosis pragmatically. She looked at the statistics. She weighed her options. She had her reproductive organs removed. Her body was pumped with chemicals until she was well again.

Then she met Stan.

For years the subject of children simply did not come up. Stan and Mabel were deep into their research. Early in their marriage they designed robotic arms for factories around the country and had patents on several different arm models. One robo-arm was specifically designed for writing inscriptions on candy conversation hearts. Another was created for the flicking lint off newly sewn cardigans. After six years designing these robotic arms, they decided to move onto legs. The Lightly Robotic Leg came together within three years. It was a resounding success among amputees. War veterans, car crash victims, thousands of amputees around the world found their footing again with Lightly Legs.

But the Lightlys soon grew bored of tinkering with mechanical appendages. Arms and legs could only carry out so many functions. That's when Mabel had an idea. She and her husband could build themselves a child. She was not a particularly motherly woman. She had never really entertained the idea of having a child, but if it meant precipitating her scientific inclinations, building a child might just be the kind of nurturing impulse she could endorse.

And so for nearly a decade, Stan and Mabel puzzled through the construction of a daughter.

Gray came about slowly. In her early stages, she was nothing more than a tangle of wire and cable, a simple wind-up automaton, but even then, Little Gray was a curious and affectionate child. She would follow her parents around their farmstead observing the chickens' feeding patterns, measuring the frequency of the old lowing heifer,

studying the barn cats skittering in the loft. She was always close behind Stan and Mabel, always cranking her little gears into a wide metal grin as she took in her world.

Over the years, a humanoid girl took shape. Brunette strands of synthetic fiber haloed a plasticine-swathed cranioshell. Scores of lint-free cardigans draped alumino-plasticine shoulders as she studied the musculoskeletal composition of the barn cats. The metal grin was replaced by a smiling mouthful of porcelain veneers. Eventually she even began accompanying her parents on trips off the farmstead.

Of course, Gray was aware of what the world outside the farm would be like. Wireless Internet had afforded her countless glimpses into what lay beyond the Lightly Farm. But the opportunity to be among other humans was exhilarating. She took any chance to go along with her parents. Even the most mundane errand was a gift. The supermarket was a multicolored labyrinth of persons and products, a crowded maze of permutational possibility. Bird-in-Hand Square was a similarly vibrant jostle. Here humans could seek community and companionship. They could mail letters, buy cones of frozen custard, sip cappuccinos, walk with dogs, throw Frisbee discs, get in arguments, parallel park cars, read newspapers, or throw trash into properly labeled receptacles. They could laugh and gossip. They could hug.

Gray's titanium bone replicants ached with longing to be among them. She loved her parents, the cats and the cows, but she grew lonely for the world at times. She grew lonely for the companionship of her peers.

That was how she found the Little Miss Pageant. An Internet search led her to a scholarly article by a local professor of sociology named Sally Duckworth. A pageant. The opportunity to be among other girls her age. The opportunity for companionship. She begged her parents to sign her up. There was no rule that stated a participant couldn't be made of metal alloys. Stan and Mabel consented through a loosely coiled knot of befuddlement. It was just one day, after all.

A dress was designed and sewn. A bathing suit was purchased. A talent act was planned. Soon, the day of the pageant arrived.

That morning, Gray had whirred with excitement, a low purring drone.

"Now remember, Gray," Mabel had said outside the doors of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge, "Other girls in the pageant may have done this before. It's okay if you lose. And don't be upset if the other girls aren't quick to companionship." Gray had nodded impatiently.

“Just being around them is a start, Mother. I can study them. I can find a point of entry.”

Now in the back row of the lodge auditorium, Mabel and her husband watched with pride as their mechanical daughter, the last contestant to perform, unveiled the first ingredient of her Talent act to the audience: A large black leather bag heavy with clanking metal.

A Brief History of the Curling Iron

The earliest patent for a curling iron design dates back to 1866 and belongs to Hiram Maxim, an inventor most known for having patented the Maxim Gun, the world’s first machine gun.

Maxim’s original design led to countless iterations of the curling iron from the Depose 11 ½ in. stove-heated hair iron all the way to the TotalBrat Heat Wave 2 in. barrel curling iron, a model most favored by teen girls like Junie-Rae Wright, whose own hair was at this moment in the curling iron’s reputable history beginning to catch fire in the dressing room of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge from the heat of prolonged exposure.

Billy Glin’s first lesson in feline biomechanics

“Dude, it was bizarre. My mom made me go to my sister’s pageant, and it turned into like this science fair shit. So the last girl gets up on the stage with this big black bag, and I think for sure she’s just going to pull out a dead body or something. The bag was huge, man, a serial killer bag for sure. So she lugs this bag out and starts talking to the crowd. She’s like, “According to Scientific American blah blah blah bull shit,” and she’s seriously like lecturing the crowd, saying all this crap I don’t understand. And this whole time, I’m like, what’s in the bag? What’s in this goddamn bag? And she’s just walking around the stage talking about these cats she’s studied. I guess they live in her barn out in the boonies? I don’t know. Anyway, she’s talking about these cats and their bones or something. And then she’s all like, “I built a cat robot,” and I was like shit, I want to see this cat robot. But she just keeps on freaking talking. She won’t stop talking, and I’m like, why would you mention a cat robot and not show us a cat robot? I have to watch freaking twelve-year-olds prance around in their little dresses and feel like a total perv, and you mention this cat robot, and then you don’t show it to me?! What the hell, dude, right? Anyway, so finally, she walks over to this bag, and it’s like, yes. This is it. This is the cat robot. Boo-yah. Right? Wrong. The

bag is full of like scraps of the metal. I know, man. It was messed up. But just wait. So she dumps all this metal onto the stage, and it sounds like a freaking garbage truck unloading a dumpster. All this shit is all over the stage. Then she walks to the front of the stage and says, “According to veterinary legend, it has been said that cats are able to reassemble their bones when placed in the same room with all their parts.” No, seriously. That’s what she said. I remember that part because I was like: shit, bro. So, then she reaches into this pocket in her dress and pulls out a little gear or something and tells the crowd the metal is a disassembled cat. She drops the little gear on the floor and then it’s just like total insanity. All the little pieces and parts start shaking, and at this point, I’m kinda scared. Like I might piss myself—dude, I’m serious. You would have been freaked out, too. The pieces all start moving around and pushing across the stage. And this girl is just standing there like this is totally normal. They start coming together and finding each other and, dude, it was like some wizard shit. Bro, I’m serious. The thing just rebuilt itself. After like three minutes, there was a robot cat on the stage just like walking around and cleaning itself. It was so epic.

Yeah, then I left because I got a text from Steve saying he’d scored some choice bud from Dave because Kelsey dumped his ass again. Naw, man. It wasn’t that good.”

Clem Salthouse chooses her own adventure

You sit in the dressing room of The Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge. You can hear a voice down the hall. Mama B is telling another contestant about her pageant days. You hear the word “baton,” the word “dreams.” Whoever that poor girl is, she is trapped in a bubble of Mama B’s nostalgia, you think.

The room is empty save one other contestant, Junie-Rae. She is prepping herself one last time for the Judge’s Decision, while Contestant Twelve, the pleasant, shy girl, Gray, performs her talent onstage. You could be Gray’s friend if you didn’t feel so strangely interested in her. You know you would somehow betray your fascination, and she would find you off-putting. It’s happened before. You’re too eager, too tall.

Junie-Rae’s glittery eye shadow pots and her silver curling iron project shards of light from the illuminated dressing mirror onto the wall of the drab little room. You briefly wonder if you should re-curl your frizzing hair. You decide it doesn’t matter.

You are ready for this day to be over.

You aren’t going to win this pageant. You know this. There’s no option to turn to page 75 and claim your victory, but we don’t need to tell you that because the truth is,

you're okay with losing. You're okay with blending in, and you're okay with missing out on that big, fat check from Georgette Von George because you've got your own things. Your own secrets, well, secret.

Mama B pops her head into the room.

“It’s nearly time!” she chirrup then vanishes. Junie-Rae makes a throaty sound and mumbles to herself. She reaches for her curling iron with one hand, her eye shadow with the other. A gold tube of aerosol hairspray rests in her lap like sleeping infant.

You smile as Junie-Rae stupidly dabs glitter into the corners of her eyelids. You smile because Junie-Rae doesn’t know. Nobody knows your secret. And that’s what makes it special—him special.

You found him in the backwoods of your family’s property early this morning with a broken leg, a small, speckled fawn whose mother was, no doubt, shot and killed by your field sporting father. When you found the fawn, he barely struggled. He lay there and fixed his pained onyx eyes onto you and your humanness. You backed away slowly, until you were just out of sight, then you sprinted back to the house to collect items for a splint. Your body made a choice before your mind did. Twenty minutes later you were back in the woods approaching the fawn slowly. You knew he wouldn’t try to struggle now because he was in too much pain. You set his leg up in the makeshift splint, and then you laid yourself down next to him and stroked his shivering little body. You hummed a song that your grandmother taught you, something about oranges and lemons, the bells of some old church far away.

You fell asleep.

The room smells strange. If we could tell you what has happening, we would. But now you can only look around the room, mildly confused, sniffing dumbly at the air like some preyed upon thing.

It all happens too fast.

Mama B appears in the door with Gray. Arabella, DeeDee, and a couple other girls are close behind. Gray’s nose twitches at the odor, and Mama B is about to speak when Junie-Rae’s crunchy, corkscrewed bouffant ignites.

The room is alive with reactions.

Junie-Rae is on her feet waving her hands around her head like two psychotic birds. Mama B is next to her fanning the flames with her clipboard. The flames grow and Junie-Rae shrieks. All the girls scream. You scream.

Gray moves.

She careens toward the blaze and tackles Junie-Rae to the ground. She throws her body over the inferno and her gossamer dress blossoms around her like a delicate rose. You watch the flames, suddenly choked by the weight of a girl, quickly dissipate. Gray rolls to her side, a mess of ash beneath her, the front of her dress burned away. Junie-Rae is quaking on the floor, nearly bald and crying.

Then the moment fills to the brim again.

Parents and other audience members pour into the room crazed with confusion and alarm. You watch Junie-Rae's mother suddenly appear at her daughter's side seemingly out of thin air as mothers often do. You watch the faces shift as they realize Gray is not burned. Her half naked body is shining intact, save for a place where a metal rib-like object pokes through, revealing the glow of titanium beneath her plasticine skin.

You watch the confused horror multiply like some kind of pestilence.

Gray smiles too calmly, tries to explain, "The curling iron must have gotten too hot. But I knew I could put out the fire." But Junie-Rae's mother is a wild animal now, a vengeful doe demented for her injured child.

You watch and begin to understand that this woman no longer sees a girl before her. She only sees this smiling, undamaged thing. The inhuman fraud that hurt her baby. And so there's someone to blame. There's something to punish.

Now you have a choice.

You can step forward, intervene. You can explain what you saw. Explain that you've been in the room the whole time.

You can act.

Or.

You can watch them descend, an ageless mob. You can watch them consume the girl, devastate her, smash and splinter her intricate body. You can stand next to seven other fear-frozen girls and listen to the noise it makes, the sound of a girl being unbuilt, the sound of your unmoving.

You can watch them do it.

You can watch them destroy this girl, tear her apart till she is nothing but shrapnel on the floor. Watch her smile kicked from her face, her chest torn open, her legs pulled from their metal sockets and smashed against the wall. You can watch her die.

You can do nothing but watch.

You, all of you, can do nothing.

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011*

The lights nestled in the ceiling are buzzing bright and hot. Human sounds rumble in the distance like a summer storm approaching, and towering shapes draw near blocking out the light, darkening the room with the haste of a dense, black cumulonimbus.

I've located myself in pieces on the floor, and I can feel every part, every screw. It is an odd sensation to be apart, not unlike the dumb, dull ache of a loosed tooth. I've read about human children receiving visits from a small winged woman who slip quarters under pillows in exchange for baby teeth. I have pulled my own teeth, the final turn and pop of those synthetic roots so blissfully satisfying. My sacrifice earned me two glinting silver dollars, stashed cold and safe under my pillow.

I am a thousand scattered bones waiting to be claimed and rejoiced.

Mother will find me soon and be pleased.

I pretended to be asleep when she took my teeth and replaced them with silver. I let her kiss my forehead and tug my earlobe. I let my heart whirl and purr like a kitten. I kept my eyes closed and pretended to believe in unreal things.

My eyes are apart now, but I can pretend to shut them again and wait for a kiss and a tug.

Mother. Yes, mother. She will shower me with silver coins.

Put me alone in a room with all my parts. See what happens.

Shira Whiteeagle remembers

Dusty light leaks in through the front window and runs down the walls of Shira Whiteeagle's sitting room. It is mid afternoon on a hot July day. The chirr of cicadas competes with a nearby lawnmower. Ice pops in a glass on the coffee table. Shira leans against her walker.

"Ms. Whiteeagle, I think we'll have the best light if you sit on your couch, here," says the man setting up the camera in the center of the room. He offers Shira his hand and together they walk to her couch. She sits.

"How's this?" she asks.

"Looks great," says the woman from the news network. She attaches a microphone clip to her collar. "All right, if you don't mind, I think we're ready to get started, Ms. Whiteeagle. Ready, Dan?" She nods at cameraman. He nods back.

"Ready, Jessica," he says. Dan steps behind the camera and puts his hand up for a moment. Jessica waits for the sign. Dan's hand drops. She turns to the camera and smiles.

"Jessica Enlow here for WVIT News Channel 7. We're here with you today for a very special occasion. We're in the home of Shira Whiteeagle on the day that marks her 105th birthday, making her the oldest citizen in both Bird-In-Hand County and the greater tri-state area. But, of course, the youngest at heart!" Jessica places her hand on Shira's thigh and squeezes. Her rings catch the daylight.

"Ms. Whiteeagle also happens to share her birthday with our fair county! And she has lived in Bird-in-Hand all her life. She attended Bird-in-Hand public schools, then went on to major in anthropology at the state research university right here in Bird-in-Hand. Right out of college she got a job with the Bird-in-Hand Historical Society, and she's worked with them ever since. Ms. Whiteeagle, first of all, happy birthday!"

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Jessica. And happy birthday to Bird-in-Hand,” says Shira. Jessica chuckles briefly, then continues.

“So I’d like to start off by asking you: what do you love the most about Bird-in-Hand?” Shira sits back in her seat a moment.

“I suppose, the people. The people of Bird-in-Hand are some of the best.”

“I understand you’ve struck up some life-long friendships here.”

“Of course, of course. I’ve known many of my friends since I was a young girl. Many of them have passed on, but there are some of us still kicking around,” Shira laughs and wrings her trembling hands.

“So Ms. Whiteeagle, what are some of your fondest memories of Bird-in-Hand?”

“I suppose I’d consider my time at the historical society the most memorable. We preserve history there after all.” Jessica raises her thin eyebrows just slightly.

“Anything else?”

“I suppose this moment.”

“This moment?”

“This interview, this day.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’m here. I’m 105, and I’m here.” Jessica laughs again.

“Well, you’re quite a role model, Ms. Whiteeagle. You really are, and on behalf of WVIT Channel 7 News, I wish you and Bird-in-Hand County a very happy birthday, and many more!”

Dan puts his hand up again.

“And, that’s a wrap!” he says, lowering his arm. Jessica gets up.

“How was that lighting on that one, Dan?” she asks.

“Looked good.”

“So we don’t need another take?” she says. She unclips her mike.

“No, I think that should do her.”

“All right, well, we need to get over to the studio. I need to get my change of clothes before we go to the Charter Day festival.”

“Just let me break this down, and we’re good to go.”

Jessica turns to Shira, still sitting on the couch.

“Bathroom?” she says.

“Down the hall there,” says Shira.

Dan kneels down and packs his camera into a case. He clips the case shut and pushes to his feet again.

“Ms. Whiteeagle?” he says.

“Yes?” says Shira.

“I did a little research for this interview, and I found some newspaper clippings from a while back. They said you were a contestant in the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand Pageant the year of the, um, the accident.”

Shira looks out her window. It’s a cloudless day. There are kids running through a sprinkler across the street. The water sprays out like the strings of an aquatic harp. One of the girls steps daintily onto the sprinkler and stops up the flow with his toes. When she pulls his foot away, the water shoots heavenward. The kids all laugh and dodge the spray.

“Ms. Whiteeagle?”

“Yes. Yes, I was there.”

“And?”

“And.”

“Is it true? I mean, is it real, what happened?”

Shira glances out the window again. The girl across the street has slipped on the slick grass and fallen on her back. She gets up and wipes soggy grass clippings from her legs, transferring the green mess from her thighs to her wet hands. She wriggles her grassy fingers at the other kids and throws her head back in laughter. Her mouth is open like she’s swallowing great gasps of air, like she’s experiencing glorious oxygen for the very first time.

The sprinkler tilts back in her direction. Ropey beams of water shoot up into the sky, then fall. The girl shakes her sopping head and stomps her foot on the ground like she’s a filly. She kicks up grass, readying herself. She runs through the spray again, sundrenched and arms akimbo like she’s fully alive, a perfectly human girl.

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