

## Left Behind

Love had worn out again the year Virgie turned 10 years old. Daddy Ray had left for good. Before, he had stayed away for two days on a gambling spree in South Carolina. The entire time her mother had paced the floor, peering out the window each time a car was heard in the distance.

This time, Wanda had started wearing a pair of torn white underpants on her head for a scarf. Her dyed blonde hair sprouted through the leg openings like dandelions growing wild in the field near the trailer. All the light had faded from her brown eyes—she kept waiting on him, sitting at the table with breakfast ready when the eleven-to-seven shift finished at the Hickory furniture plant.

They followed Ray everywhere from the Saturday night cockfights to the Pentecostal Church revival. Half-asleep from the backseat of the car, Virgie had watched the men clamoring around the circle as the birds squawked loudly and feathers rose in the wake of men cheering and yelling. She had wanted to get a tiny bit closer but Ray had dragged her back to the car. He smacked her on the butt and shoved her into the back seat. There had been a flurry of feathers between a big red rooster and a shimmering black one, pecking and clawing amid the shouting under naked bulbs that seemed to hang magically from tree limbs. The stench of raw corn whiskey, sweat, and hogs from a nearby pen filled the air. Ray had barely looked at her with the cigarette dangling from his lips and a stack

of wrinkled bills in his left hand. In her head, the sounds had converged with the tambourine shaking, drums beating, and people writhing on the floor as the Holy Ghost entered their bodies. She had seen the women and men running up and down the aisle speaking in tongues in defiance of the Devil.

Each morning Wanda was furtive and hopeful, watching as the grits and bacon gelled together in the cold grease. On payday, she finally decided Ray wasn't coming back. She stubbed out her Salem menthol in a blue saucer pockmarked with the stains of a week's worth of cigarettes. Finally, she dumped the coffee and banged the glass pot against the stainless-steel sink until it shattered. Then, she laid her head down on the sink rim and sobbed.

She didn't remind her mother that Ray kept talking about moving to Charlotte—said he was tired of this gossipy small town. Virgie tugged at her mother's hand, trying to make her remember that she hadn't left, too. The trailer reeked of stale cigarette smoke and bacon grease. Neither of them had bathed because Wanda had forgotten to pay the water bill. A stack of unopened letters smeared with half-eaten dinners, grape Kool-Aid, and ashes littered the tabletop.

“Look, Wanda, I'll eat the bacon. These are the fluffiest biscuits in this whole town.” She stuffed the bacon and bread into her mouth. Crumbs hung on her upper lips and then fell to the floor that was littered with mail, clothes, and the grime accumulated from weeks. But Wanda didn't respond. The back of her matted hair was exposed where the elastic had hiked up.

Instead, Wanda slid to the floor like a lifeless rag doll and lay face down on the vinyl floor. She traced the fake squares outlined on the floor to resemble tiles,

then banged her head repeatedly against the debris and shards from the broken coffee pot.

The girl paced back and forth between the telephone and her mother. When a thin line of blood trickled from Wanda's head, Virgie had called her Grandpa.

Grandpa Percy flung the trailer door open and scowled. He twisted an old sweat-stained baseball cap in his hands as if to ring water from it. Outside, the sun shone magically like the sky was full of blue glass. Wanda looked up and blinked at the rays of sunlight. Dust particles flittered up in the slice of light from the doorway.

"Pull yourself together girl and look after this child," he pointed at Virgie who had reverted to sucking her thumb. He dragged Wanda to the sofa with the white cotton panties askew like a little sailor's hat. He snatched the panties from her head and dabbed at her forehead with such force that she fell back against the couch. Wanda cowered under his glare and began to cry again.

"I know decency ain't a part of your thinking, but you've got to pull yourself together. Your mama raised you to be better than this."

Virgie hoped he wouldn't mention that Ray was low-down and low-class anyway—hanging out with every hoodlum in town.

Percy Aldridge was land rich but his house was more ragged than the trailer, which was practically brand new. He had timber, cattle, and not one son to carry on the family name.

"Used to be cotton opened white in the fields like popcorn before jobs in the furniture factories and plants." Her grandfather said that every time he stood on

the top concrete step, appraising the surrounding land. The big vein in his neck throbbed at the indignity.

She wished her Grandma Martha were still alive. Virgie remembered her generous lap and open, welcoming arms. She would have known how to help Wanda.

“Get up from there and clean up this mess,” he stared at the cold breakfast and the girl.

Mechanically, the young woman moved about the kitchen. “Just one mess after the other—you never will learn, will you?”

Wanda started to wail.

“Hush up. Got what you deserved. Having a baby with a married man—did he find something younger and sweeter? You left a man that was decent, so you could live this way.” His eyes scanned the room with disgust.

“You better get off your ass and go to work. Don’t come crying to me for money. I’m done bailing you out.” He shook his head at the uselessness of his daughter’s life—she went from one bad relationship to the next. He dabbed at the sweat on his neck with a dirty red and white bandana. Wanda had gingerbread coloring like her daddy, except for her dyed hair that was overdue a press and curl. He already knew that she had quit the job at the hosiery mill.

“You got school, girl. Get yourself ready,” he said but didn’t turn around. By the time Virgie finished dressing, her grandfather had left.

Wanda, with a fixed look, handed Virgie the empty Snow White lunch box bought at a yard sale.

“Bus should be here any minute.” Wanda gazed up at the digital wall clock in need of new batteries that had stopped at 12:07 a week ago. She had a vacuous look on her face as if she could see through the girl.

“All right.” Virgie hesitated at the door, wondering if she should leave or call her Grandpa again. But Percy Aldridge wasn’t likely to come back.

The loud diesel engine announced the bus climbing the hill close to her house. She both loved and hated the sound of the bus, gleaming in the sun like a big yellow cat. She stood beside Wanda, who leaned down and kissed her on the head. She felt the thinness of her mother and the woman’s heart pounding furiously in her chest.

“It’s ok, Wanda. Stay inside.” Virgie tried to lead Wanda back to bed.

But Wanda grabbed her hand and led her out the door. She took the package of cigarettes from her dingy housecoat pocket and sat down on the steps.

The high school boys caught a sight of Wanda sitting with her housecoat opened mid-thigh. In their lettered red and gold jackets, they stuck their heads out the window and jeered amid the laughter.

“Give it up for me, honey.” Whoops of laughter rang from the bus.

“Let’s see the rest of that.”

“Show it all off.”

Virgie climbed into the seat behind the driver. The gruff old man with a sweaty dark face turned to stare at the unruly boys until they returned to their seats. He had been to the Great War with Grandpa.

Wanda hadn't moved and was blowing smoke rings up toward the clouds as if she didn't have a care in the world, as if the house was full of food and the stack of bills was already paid.

Virgie fixed her eyes on the open fields flashing through the bus window with all the green grass, trees, and blue sky meshing in a blur. At school, she could be alone with her storybooks and shut out the world until the return trip. Late in the afternoon, the class would color or draw. She would pick her favorite colors—blue, pink, teal, and purple—from the big box of crayons and make a beautiful picture of a smiling family in a big house with a dog in the yard and a red and white striped beach ball on the lawn. Wanda would be happy in the picture and a man better than Daddy Ray would come home every Friday night with the paycheck. No more cock fights. There would be no fights in their new house where she had her own room.

Mrs. Jones met the bus each morning to usher in the little ones for kindergarten and the older kids who got free breakfast. She was the new teacher from Virginia. Casually, she pulled Virgie aside with a hand on her shoulder and glanced up at the bus driver, who slammed the door shut. With wide brown eyes surrounded by freshly curled hair, she examined Virgie's appearance. The girl had chosen her ruby red patent-leather shoes with the broken buckle, white knee socks, and her favorite blue dress. Wanda had promised to iron it days before but had forgotten. Virgie smoothed the front creases with her hands and checked for the hair-bow in her matted brown hair. It was in dire need of washing and a good straightening like Grandma Martha had once done. Back then, she had pigtails

and matching bows in her hair. She had learned not to play at recess because of the flopping shoe since the new teacher frowned on bare feet.

“Was your Mama home this morning, honey?”

Virgie simply bobbed her head up and down.

“Did you eat?”

She pulled up her drooping socks so that they touched her knees again.

“Virgie. Look at me when I’m speaking. Did you eat?”

“No ma’am.” She didn’t mention the bite of cold bacon eaten for Wanda’s sake.

“Stand right here. I’ll get a lunchroom pass so you can get something hot to start the day.”

“Mama says we don’t take charity.”

“This isn’t charity, honey. Your mama pays taxes and this is a little refund.”

Virgie looked perplexed but stood silently by the teacher. Wanda always said that you don’t put your own business in the street.

She herded the group of children that had formed a line behind Virgie. As a newcomer, the girl could feel their eyes boring into her back, so she stood aside and let the other children go ahead. Quietly, they filed down the empty hallway into the cafeteria. Virgie never bought lunch—usually, she had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a corner away from the other children. Since Daddy Ray left, Wanda couldn’t remember to shop for food; they had eaten the last of the bread two days before. She had resorted to saltines until they were all eaten at dinner the night before.

The hot food smelled good to Virgie. She stepped forward and peered at the grits and oatmeal.

“Wait your turn,” yelled the little boy who had been in front of her.

“I ain’t breaking the line. I’m just looking. I don’t usually get free food like you welfare cases.” The boy had a heart-shaped face with big brown eyes that squinted with anger.

“You calling me trash?” The little boy backed up with his fist bawled up like a boxer. He rocked back, ready to batter the new opponent like Cassius Clay. Virgie saw the holes in his shirt sleeve and dirt on his face. She was at least a head taller than him and could probably make him cry.

“I ain’t calling you nothing. But we ain’t on welfare.”

The boy looked thoughtful and relaxed his stance. “We’re just down on our luck. That’s not the same when you’re sick, my daddy says.”

“What kind of sick? Is it bad?” Virgie suddenly wondered if Wanda was sick and she didn’t know it. There was no one to ask except her grandfather, who mostly ignored her.

“He got hurt at the cotton mill. Laid up for a while. Then, I’ll bring my lunch again.”

Virgie nodded and stared down at the empty lunchbox in her hand. “Me, too. I used to bring my lunch. We’re just having a bad run of luck, too.”

Her mother’s luck never seemed to get better. When Ray moved into the trailer, she had promised Virgie things would change—no more late nights waiting in the car outside bars, cockfights, and gambling. Wanda had promised no



more mornings when she awakened to find a stranger eyeing her like a secret cereal surprise at the breakfast table.

The boy moved back in line and got a red plastic tray from the stack.

“How old are you?” She looked down at the scrawny little boy.

“Nine.”

“I turned 10 years old last week,” she said proudly. Virgie remembered the imaginary birthday party with a new dress that had tiny blue flowers and smocking at the bodice. In her mind, all the children had come with presents wrapped in shiny silver paper and tied with big red bows. Wanda and Daddy Ray smiled adoringly at her and gave her a new purple bicycle with a white basket, yellow flowers, and a tiny horn.

“What’s your name?”

“Evan McAllister.”

“Pleased to meet you, Evan. I’m Virgie.” She knew all about the McAllister family like everyone else in town. His daddy lost a finger at the furniture plant because he was drunk. If she had given her last name, Evan would have known her whole life’s story, too. Her life and Wanda’s life were practically written down book by book just like the Bible, except with new names like John, Thomas, and Raymond. They were all likely to get hell-fire and brimstone, according to Grandpa Percy.

She watched the boy take a white plate from a stack that was nearly taller than he was. He took a little red and white carton of milk from a clear bowl filled with ice on the bottom. Virgie followed suit.

The steaming aroma of the bacon made her queasy thinking about Wanda. But even then, she knew her mother would still be sitting on the top concrete step when the bus returned in the afternoon. Wanda would be there sipping lukewarm beer, smoking another pack of cigarettes, staring into the distance, and conjuring up Daddy Ray's replacement, as if he would materialize out of thin air instead of the beer joint down the road.