

Can you take me back where I came from?

I watched the man at the head of the line putting the fixings in his coffee. He had been second in line when I arrived and I let a few other people ahead of me so I could look him over without being obvious. Still trying to look at him only out of the corner of my eye, I couldn't help but notice he had put on a lot of weight. Looking at him now, slightly less than six feet of soft pudginess, I thought about the last time I had seen him. He was probably well over two hundred pounds now, but last time he had only been six-pounds-seven-ounces.

There had been just the brief glimpse of him before he was taken from the room. And only a few seconds to hear his voice. Then I was left alone with a surly nurse who cleaned me up, scowling the whole time. I had nothing to say to her and although she probably had plenty she could say to me, she just busied herself with getting me ready to go back to the ward where they kept all the pregnant teenagers until they could relieve them of their babies.

But I had heard enough of his cry to know he had a good set of lungs, and enough to leave a voice in my soul that has haunted me for almost forty years.

He looked to be in his early fifties although I knew his age to the minute and thought he hadn't taken very good care of himself. Overweight, scruffy, needing a shave and a haircut, maybe even a little unsanitary.

I couldn't see that he had got any of my looks, but there was no way to know if he resembled his father. I hadn't really looked at any of the six of them and since the police had never been too interested in me, I imagine they're still out walking around somewhere. On my more miserable days, I liked to imagine that they had all been sent to Vietnam and were caught in a back draught of napalm. On my really miserable days, I hoped the napalm hadn't killed them.

But regardless of who he looked like, here he was within reach of my arms and he had no idea who I was. Well, actually he did know who I was, he just had no idea that I knew who he was.

Life had not been great after he was born. I was only fourteen and just like the uncaring nurse in the maternity ward who whisked away my baby, my family shunned me as though being gang-raped by a bunch of street punks was something I had gone looking for. I was a good girl, never in trouble, a virgin. But because the cops treated me like I had asked for it, so did my parents. Although no one ever told me to get the hell out of the house, there wasn't much doubt that's what they wanted. So within a few months of his birth, I was gone. Different city, different state, different name. I had enough smarts to head south where it was warmer because I expected to spend some nights sleeping in parks. And I did. But eventually I managed to get a job in a burger joint and found myself living in a rundown squatters' building with about thirty other runaways.

I'm not sure how long I was there but it was more than a year. Until one day, my life took an unexpected and unrecognized turn. Sitting on a crowded and dirty city bus, I found a magazine on the floor and without really being interested, picked it up and stuffed in my jacket.

Fourteen years later I attended my first book signing. Not someone else's signing. My book signing. It had my name on it, it had my heart and soul between the covers.

The magazine was one of those periodicals for writers and when I finally did look at it, I thought it all seemed like someone else's world. But for some reason, I hung onto it and a few months later an idea came into my head one day when I was mindlessly serving burgers and trying to up-sell fries. The customer in front of me was a very pregnant girl who looked like she couldn't have been more than thirteen and I wondered what her story was. The lunch crowd was heavy so I quickly put it out of my mind, only to have it return while I was on the bus to home. By the time I got there, I had invented a complete story about her, which I soon pushed to the back of my mind and forgot about.

Then one day shortly after my twenty-second birthday, I was in a convenience store waiting in line and I noticed on the rack a current edition of the magazine I found on the bus. Curiosity made me pick it up and, flipping through it, I came across advertising for a writing contest. So I bought the magazine and over the next few weeks I tried to put down on paper the story of the young pregnant girl who wanted the two giant cheeseburgers and the extra fries. I was almost embarrassed to send it in because I never even finished high school, and I sure didn't know anything about writing.

When my book was published, it sold fairly well. I had managed to sell a few other stories by then and this book was a collection of old and new. Almost all involved young girls in trouble, and one was autobiographical. I moved out of the flophouse where I had been staying and even though I kept my job in the grease pit for another year or so, my spare time went into writing.

Since then, it's been nothing but novels. Historical novels, mainly, and today's book signing was for my eighth. This one was about a romance between a Hindu and a Muslim during the tumultuous months just prior to independence in India. I like historical fiction because I get the satisfaction of research but my imagination can still run free without being too concerned about any minor historical inaccuracy.

The man who had caught my attention in the coffee line, had signed up for the writers' workshop that was to follow the book signing. He was obviously there to see me, and he was carrying a copy of the short stories.

I am more than a little ashamed of how I even knew who he was. It had seemed like a natural thing when I started becoming a successful author to see if I could track him down. Now that I was no longer poor, there were things I could offer him, questions I could answer for him.

At first, the adoption people had been helpful and it hadn't taken them very long to track him down. But as I sat across the desk from the adoption worker, she read aloud the letter that he had sent her. He said that he already knew everything he needed to know about his birth mother, about her prostitution, her drug use, and her prison record. I protested that none of that was true but the adoptions lady just shrugged and muttered that's probably what his adoptive parents told him. Regardless of whether it was true, he believed it and he didn't want to meet that woman. There was no way they would tell me how to find him.

I pleaded, I cajoled, I was aggressive, I was sweet. And the answer was still no.

But I was also resourceful, and by the time I left her office, I had managed to get a good look at the letter lying on her desk. Upside down or not, his name and address were in plain view.

So I stalked him. Never to make contact, just to see him. But I never did and today, he was here. I had been stunned when the workshop registration came in but as soon as I saw the name and address, I knew that everyone attending would be given a name tag.

As he finally stood in front of me, he said something about liking all my novels but he recently found the short story collection in a used book store. He liked it very much and asked me to sign it for him and as I did, he wondered if any of the stories were based on true events. I thought about the one that chronicled his birth, and replied: “Oh, they’re just stories out of my own head. But I am glad you like them.”