

**Just You and Me, Baby**

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Creative Writing at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Spring 2007

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Just You and Me, Baby

A Short Story

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## Just You and Me, Baby

Mason took the balled up blanket off the van floor and shook out the dust before covering the girl. He liked the way she looked, lying there sleeping, the street light sneaking in through the window to illuminate her face. He hoisted up his ragged khaki pants and then crouched down beside her, studying her face. She wasn't particularly beautiful, with her beaked nose, pale skin, and wiry brown hair. He might have even said she was plain; but there was something about her thick half-parted lips, the way she drew breath so quietly in and out of them, the way they drew him in too, that made her different. He knew he'd remember this one.

Mason slouched back against a bulging garbage bag of dirty clothes and stared at her breasts heaving up and down underneath the black tattered blanket. Of course, she'd never remember him. And if she did, he'd probably just be considered a slip-up; one of those stupid mistakes she'd made when she was young and drunk and didn't know any better than to fool around with scumbags. She'd beat herself up about it for a while, but then it'd turn into a funny story she'd tell all her friends when they played truth or dare or

whatever the hell it was girls did. The night she slept with a jerk in a Volkswagen— that's all he'd ever be to her.

He grabbed the vinyl purple purse from beside the girl's feet and chucked it at the back window, spilling its contents: keys, a leather wallet, some pennies and dimes, a pack of Marlboro Lights, a book of matches. The crash caused her to stir, but not to wake. She rolled onto her side, hiding her face. *Just as well.*

The Marlboro s and matches had skidded within reach and Mason snatched them up, slid out a cigarette and lit it, before stuffing them into his own pocket. He inhaled deeply and blew the smoke towards the girl. *She's no different. Not one bit.* He considered throwing her naked ass onto the cold street and he laughed thinking of how traumatized she'd be if he did. But even Mason had his limits. Instead, he ripped the thin blanket off of her and covered his legs with it.

The girl mumbled something unintelligible and rolled over to face him again, but this time her eyes were open, just slightly. Mason stared at her blankly, not knowing if she was going to scream, to vomit, or to simply fall back into an intoxicated sleep. Grabbing a half-full bottle of Sun Drop from off the floor, he dropped the burning cigarette into the soda and swiveled it around for a moment, avoiding eye contact with her. He didn't want to see her expression; he didn't want to know what she was thinking about him, about lying naked in a smoke-filled van, about anything. But when he finally looked up, her plump red lips were smiling at him. It was only briefly, maybe two seconds or less, but it had definitely been a smile.

She shut her eyes again and a chilled shiver shook her body, tiny goose bumps rising to the surface of her bare skin. The girl curled her knees to her chest, making her

look strangely similar to a baby squirrel Mason had rescued as a child. So small and vulnerable, its eyes not yet opened; he would've never noticed the little thing had his cat not been swiping at it through the tall grass, its only protection. He'd chased the cat away, then ran inside and grabbed his mother from the kitchen. Mason remembered how tender his mom had been, packing pine-straw on top of an old towel in a shoe box and placing the squirrel so gently inside. She'd told him she was proud of her boy for not hurting the animal.

Mason lifted the blanket from his lap and laid it back over the girl, tucking it around her sides to make sure she stayed warm. Then he lay down beside her, wrapping his arms around her small body. Nuzzling his head into her hair, he kissed the back of her neck. Maybe she *was* different. Maybe she'd keep him. *Me with a college girl...* His mother would've been proud.

Ellie woke up in the back of a van, on the floor in the arms of a snoring stranger. *Jesus Christ, not again.* His face was buried into her chest, so all she could see was his matted blonde hair and his freckled bony back. He certainly smelled awful, like liquor, stale cigarettes, must. She lifted the stranger's head slightly, just enough to catch a look at his face. *Oh no.* Not quite a stranger; this was worse. It was that sketchy guy who always stumbled into parties uninvited, drank everyone else's beer, told offensive jokes and, even though they all turned their noses up at him, somehow never got the hint he was unwanted. Ellie wasn't sure how he'd coaxed her here, but she assumed he'd slipped

something in her drink. She almost hoped so. The idea that it was voluntary was way too humiliating.

She crept back, contorting her body this way and that, holding his head so it wouldn't bang against the floor once she got away; she was lucky he was a heavy sleeper. Finally free she snuck around the van searching for her things, careful not to step on any crumpled fast-food bags. Her sweater and jeans had been draped over the front passenger seat, but her bra and panties were nowhere to be found. *That nasty bastard probably stole them. Probably has them hidden in the glove compartment.* But Ellie didn't want to waste time looking. She gathered up everything that'd fallen out of her purse (why had she dumped it out on the floor?), making sure to check her wallet for her money, credit cards, and license. Then, with everything secure, she slipped on her clogs, tiptoed over the sleeping vagabond and, holding her breath, slowly slid the van door open just wide enough for her to maneuver through. She didn't bother to shut it.

*Sweet safety!* Ellie exhaled with relief and jogged down the sidewalk a ways, making sure the earwax-orange van was out of sight before stopping to get her bearings. The houses along the road looked vaguely familiar, but then most of the expensive homes on the side streets of downtown Raleigh looked the same to a girl from Garner: long bay windows, wide porches, widows' walks, and round castle-like rooms. They were old and intimidating, most likely haunted.

The chilled October air chapped Ellie's face as she ran towards the street sign on the corner. Her head throbbed with each step upon the concrete. *Have to stop drinking. Have to stop drinking.* Huffing along, Ellie kept her eyes on the ground, fearing to look up and have some hoity-toity housewife see her like this. She knew she looked nuts; hair



all a mess, breasts flopping up and down without restraint, mascara probably smeared down her face. *This weekend really can't get any worse.* At last she made it to the end of the road, out of breath and a little nauseated, but at least warmer. Bloodworm Street—of course. She'd parked her Honda at the Krispy Kreme on Person, the street running parallel to this one, for the party. It would only be about a ten minute walk from here.

"Excuse me, Sir."

A bang on the side window jolted Mason from his sleep. He sat up and rubbed the crust from his eyes, squinting at the small uniformed man standing in front of the van's opened door.

"Sir, you can't park here. You can't sleep here. And, from the smell of it, you probably shouldn't have even been driving last night." The officer had a booming voice, surprising for his short, dumpiness.

"Isn't it illegal for you to open someone's car without asking?" Mason said.

"Son, you were the one who left the door open. I suggest you drop the attitude and get out your license and registration."

Mason snatched his old Nirvana T-shirt from off the floor, put it on, and crawled into the front of the van to get his registration from the console. The policeman walked around to the driver's side door and waited, tapping his fingers along the windshield. Mason rolled down the window and handed him the paper.

"You know you're getting fingerprints all over the glass," Mason said.

"Mmph. And your license."

Mason stuffed his hand into his pants' pocket, pulling out a wallet made from duct tape. He slid out his license and tossed it to the officer.

"You're really trying my patience, boy," the policeman mumbled before walking away to process Mason's information.

Mason stretched his arms out and folded them under his head, heaving out a heavy sigh. So she was gone. Didn't even bother to close the door behind her. And here he was having to deal with a cop first thing in the morning. *What a bitch—Life. Her. Me, for thinking she was different.* Mason shut his eyes and kicked his bare feet up on the dashboard. *What a day.*

The policeman stumped back to the van, handed the license and registration in through the window, and tipped his aviator sunglasses.

"Don't let me catch you sleeping in your car again. Go on home now."

Mason cranked his van and turned the radio up as loud as it could go without blowing his old speakers. Then he sped off, making sure to squeal his tires as he rounded the corner of Bloodworm and Pell. *No different. Just like all the rest.*

But she *had* been different, that girl Ellie; she had listened to him. It's true she'd been drunk, but any other girl would've just told him to leave her alone, to stop pouring his heart out, or maybe just have asked him to sleep with her. But not her. There was a quiet depth to her, an endearing nervousness. She wasn't like those heartless rich girls who'd only pay attention to you if it'd raise their social status. She'd listened, she'd smiled at him. There had to be some explanation for why she had left without saying good-bye. *It's not in her nature to be rude, my sweet, sweet Ellie.* He wished he had gotten a picture of her sleeping so peacefully; he would've put it on his dashboard, or

maybe beside his bed. No, he would've kept it in his pocket so he could look at it whenever he wanted. *But there 'll be time for pictures.* He smiled thinking of how great their life together could be. He had to see her again.

Ellie dropped her keys into the little yellow basket hanging on the wall beside the front door. The answering machine beeped from the end table across the living room, the red light steadily flashing; one, two, three—beep; one, two, three—beep. She walked over and pushed the large gray button, before slumping over on her worn green sofa.

"October 27. 11:33 PM. Message One," declared the robotic voice of the machine.

The first was almost inaudible due to all the yelling in the background, but Ellie could make out her friend's slurred voice. *Ellie, it's Kris tine. Where... hell are you ? .... looking everywhere... hope you 're... be safe... really need to get a cell phone.*

"October 28. 12:28 AM. Message Two."

Kristine again. This time, she sounded like she was on the verge of tears—a customary stage of her drunkenness. *Listen. I don't know where you went, but I'm worried sick. I've been... I've been looking everywhere. And... this girl...Rebecca? Rebecca, right? Yeah, Rebecca. She's looking, too. I showed her your picture. So, I hope you 're ok. I'm going go keep looking.*

"October 28. 1:16 AM. Message Three."

And now it was time for belligerent anger. *So apparently you went off somewhere with that disgusting Mason kid. Honestly, I don't know what's wrong with you. He's weird; who knows what he's doing to you right now? Jesus, Ellie. I'm only going to be here for another two weeks, and then you 're really going to have to start looking out for yourself.*

"End of new messages."

Ellie looked up at her Elvis wall clock; it was only 9:30. Kristine would still be sleeping, at least until noon.

She kicked off her shoes and pulled her feet up onto the couch, wedging her toes between the cushions. *So everyone knows.* Ellie had planned to just forget about the night, but if Kristine knew, there was no telling who else did.

Closing her eyes and resting her head on the arm of the sofa, Ellie thought about Mason. Why had she done it? Most of the night was fuzzy (she knew she shouldn't have drunk Vodka), but she could vaguely remember sitting out on the back porch with Mason, his hands covering his face. *He was crying...what was it about? Something about his mother.* Ellie had always been a sucker for emotional people, no matter how despicable they may really be. She remembered feeling very sorry for him, wanting to hold him in her arms. *Did I initiate everything?* At first she didn't want to admit it to herself, but Ellie was almost positive she'd kissed him first. She may have even been the one to suggest sex. Oddly, thinking back on it now, she didn't really regret it that much.

But no, she did regret it. She had to regret it. He was *Mason*; no one would ever respect her if they knew. And with all of the stories she'd heard about him, how could she possibly respect herself? He'd drugged her, that's it. That's all anyone needed to

know. She'd forget all about him and his van and his sad stories. Or at least she'd pretend to.

Mason's van sputtered into his father's long private driveway off Anderson Drive in North Raleigh, barely making all the way to the end on such a low amount of gas. The chubby Mexican gardener Miguel was busy stuffing leaves into a clear trash bag, but stopped to wipe the sweat from underneath his Dodgers baseball cap and give Mason a little wave. Mason smiled with a nod as he climbed out of the van, and then made his way up the front steps of the white pillared house. His father was inside, probably sipping coffee and scanning through the business section of the *News and Observer*, looking down at his watch every twenty minutes to see how much longer until the twelve o' clock Panthers game; such was his ritual on Sundays during football season.

Mason reached for the door knob, but just as he wrapped his fingers around it the wooden door swung open.

"Oh goodness!" The ever-perky, blonde Cheryl gasped and then flashed her toothy smile. "You scared me."

"Sorry," he mumbled, and started to brush past her.

But Cheryl grabbed his arm as he walked through the doorway, turning him to face her. "I was just about to go out and do some shopping, but if you're hungry I can stay and make you breakfast. Bacon and eggs, maybe some toast, huh?"

She definitely tried hard to make him like her, too hard, and that only made Mason resent her more. Cheryl had been the hospice nurse in his mother's final months

of life; had bathed her skeletal body; had listened to her moans as the colon cancer ate away at her organs; had been the only one in the room that Easter morning when she took her last breath. And then what did she do? Swoop right in and snatch up his father for herself, happily married a year and a half later. Cheryl could try all she wanted, but he'd never forgive her.

"I'm not hungry."

Mason trudged inside through the foyer to the yellow wall-papered kitchen, not bothering to say good-bye to his step-mother. His father was sitting at the little round table by the window in his royal blue bathrobe, drinking his coffee, reading his newspaper, just as expected. The white lace curtains had been drawn shut over closed blinds, making the room darker than Mason was used to. *Mom always left the curtains open.* His dad looked up from the paper and smiled, patting the chair beside him with ink-smudged fingers.

"How you been, Champ? Haven't seen you in a while." He put his arm around Mason's shoulders for a manly embrace.

"I've been all right, I guess."

"How's the apartment going? Keeping it clean?"

Mason got up, ignoring his father's question, and began opening cabinets. Special K, Cheerios, some kind of organic fiber-plus cereal, plain oatmeal—absolutely nothing edible.

"When did you start eating all this crap? Where are the Fruit Loops?"

His father frowned and lifted his coffee mug to his lips, but spoke before taking a sip.

"I asked you a question, Mason. It'd be nice if you answered."

Mason rolled his eyes. "I don't have an apartment anymore."

"What do you mean?"

Slamming the cabinet shut, Mason glared at his dad. "I *mean* I don't have an apartment any more. I lost my job, couldn't pay rent, couldn't live there any more.

What's so hard to understand?"

His father sighed and, flipping the page of the newspaper, spoke more to himself than to his son. "A video store.. .how hard could it have been? What in the hell am I going to do with you?"

Snatching a banana out of the white porcelain fruit bowl on the counter, Mason stormed out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs to his bedroom, flinging the door closed behind him with a smash. They, or more probably Cheryl, had cleaned it while he was gone; his piles of clothes had been pack away into drawers or hung up in the closet; his old twin bed had been made-up and the pillows fluffed; the floor vacuumed; even the framed photograph of his mother had been taken out of its normal spot on the window sill and placed on the nightstand. *It was therefor a reason! She needed to be in the sunshine!*

He sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the picture. It had been taken about a year before she was diagnosed with cancer—'98 or '99—when she was still strong and beautiful. Mason wasn't sure why it was his favorite shot of her; he'd seen countless others much prettier. And there were tons of great photographs of them together packed up in a box at the top of his closet. But maybe it was how natural she looked in this one; laughing under the blooming dogwood tree, pink and white petals flecked about her sandy-blonde hair, her head tilted and her cheeks blushed. Mason

carefully held the frame in his palm and cleaned the surface of the glass with the end of his t-shirt before putting it back, faced outward, in a patch of sunlight on the window sill. *She 'd want to look outside.*

Mason knew he'd been a wreck since his mother's death—dropping out of high school, failing out of college after his dad had pulled all kinds of strings to get him in, all the drinking and fighting and smoking—but how could he have possibly been any different? *She was the only person in the world who understood me, who cared.* She wouldn't have been able to bear seeing her straight-A son become so worthless, so angry, so miserable. But she had been gone so long and, without her, Mason hadn't had anyone left to impress. *But now there's Elite.*

Ellie took a seat in a back booth of El Dorado and waited for Kristine, who, as usual, was late. Nibbling on crunchy tortilla chips and spicy salsa, she thumbed through the menu, chuckling to herself as she read through the *array* of entrees. Taco with beef or chicken. Quesadilla with beef or chicken. Nachos and cheese (beef or chicken added for \$2.00). She never understood why Kristine loved this place so much. *Greasy food, ridiculously loud Mexican music, and a well below par sanitation grade. Why come all the way back to Garner for this?*

A short, round-faced waiter slunk over the table and, in broken English, asked Ellie if she was ready. She was just about to tell him her order when Kristine popped



through the door in a bulky camouflage jacket and backwards baseball cap. She waved and skipped over to the table.

"Jorge! What's up, little buddy?" She slung her left arm around the shy waiter's shoulders, jostling him a little. He grinned and looked down at the blue carpeted floor, nervous but obviously happy to see her. People always remembered Kristine—she made sure of it.

"Combination four? Sweet tea?" he asked her as she slid in on the other side of the booth.

"Good job, hon. You're *muy inteligente*" she said with a wink, propping her head onto her hands.

Ellie ordered water, salad with chicken, and ranch dressing on the side.

"A salad and water? Who in the hell gets salad at a Mexican restaurant? You're going to waste away like a supermodel."

The waiter giggled as he walked to the kitchen, though Ellie was pretty positive he hadn't understood the joke. *Probably just thinks she's flirting with him.*

Scooping a hunk of salsa onto a chip, Kristine raised one eyebrow with a smirk. "So, Miss Runaway, long night?"

Ellie laughed. "I don't even remember most of it. All I know is that I feel like a complete ass today."

Nodding in agreement, her friend smiled. "As you should. You know I spent all night looking for you. And then that whole Mason thing..." She cocked her head to the side and furrowed her eyebrows. "You didn't sleep with him did you?"

Ellie felt her cheeks warming and couldn't bring herself to look her friend in the face.

"I think so. In his van."

"Oh, Ellie! That's disgusting!" Kristine spat a chunk of chip onto the table, but quickly wiped it up with a napkin. "In his van?"

"Keep it down, would you?" Ellie could see an elderly couple looking over at them from across the restaurant. She hoped they didn't know her parents.

Jorge came back with the drinks and smiled at Kristine as he sat them on the table, but this time she was too busy fumbling around in her purse to notice him. She pulled out a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke out of the side of her mouth as the unnoticed waiter slunk away.

"God, Ellie. Of all people. You know he's been voluntarily homeless for months now, right?"

"Yeah, I heard."

"And it's not like he hasn't had everything handed to him. His dad's some big-shot attorney, lives off Anderson Drive. He *chooses* to ride around in that shitty van. He could've done anything with his life and didn't." Kristine tapped her cigarette against the glass ashtray and took another deep puff.

"I know."

"Really, what were you thinking? You're so much better than that."

Ellie unwrapped her silverware from the white paper napkin and laid it out across the table, not sure how to defend herself.

"Well... I was drunk. And, you know, he's not really a bad person once you start talking to him. And his life hasn't been *that* easy—his mom died."

"That's sad and all, but lots of people's parents die and they don't go insane. You can't have sympathy for people who won't help themselves, Ellie."

*She 'll never understand.*

Jorge brought their food to the table. "Hot plate," he said, setting down Kristine's enchiladas, taco and Spanish rice.

"Hot senior," Kristine giggled and winked again.

*That made up for it.* The little man walked away satisfied, his dark round cheeks almost blushing.

"Anyway," Kristine started again, shoveling a spoonful of rice into her mouth. "Like I was saying, you don't need to waste your time with guys like that. I won't be able to protect you when I leave, so you have to start making good choices."

*Thank God, a new subject.* "So you're really going to move to the mountains?"

"Yep. I'll be in Boone in two weeks. Finally back with my man."

*Oh yes, Steven.* Steven had been Kristine's boyfriend for the past two years, staying together even though he'd gone to school at Appalachian and she'd gone to N.C. State. He was gorgeous, smart, funny.. .perfect. Ellie had always thought they were a great couple, but now that he was stealing her best friend away to the cold, snowy mountains, she couldn't help feeling resentful.

"Why not wait until after the holidays? Won't your parents be mad?" Ellie asked, pouring dressing across pale iceberg lettuce.

"Steven and I have been apart for too long as it is. Besides, my parents have three other kids to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with—they won't miss me too much."

"Aren't you scared?"

"Nope. Only two things I'll really miss; you and this place." *Glad to see I made it onto such an exclusive list.*

The sound of heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs, and then came a hard knock at Mason's bedroom door.

"We need to talk," his father said, in a calm but stern voice.

"Fine."

His dad walked in with an air of authority, glasses on and pipe in hand; but, seeing his scrawny pale legs poking out from underneath his bathrobe and his boat-sized feet shoved into fuzzy red slippers, Mason couldn't help snickering.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Heffner? All's well at the Playboy mansion, I hope."

Flashing a cross look and ignoring his son's teasing, his father began his familiar "You Need to Get Your Life Together" lecture, pacing back and forth across the room in his lawyer-like way, head held high, arms behind his back, signaling important points by raising his index finger.

".. .You need to think about the future..."

Mason generally ignored his father's speeches, especially when he looked so ridiculous, but this time he really wanted to change. Not so much for his dad's sake—he'd never been a good parent, always trying to push Mason off on other relatives or send him away to institutions.

".. .A good life isn't going to be handed to you..."

But he was tired of feeling like a failure. Tired of the way people looked down at him, laughed at him, ignored him. Tired of being alone.

".. .No one is going to do it for you..."

Mason wanted to be with Ellie and he was sure she wanted to be with him, too; but not like this. Not without a job, without a house, without a future.

".. .And that's why self-discipline is so important..."

More than anything, Mason wanted to be a man his mother would've been proud of. And, even if his father was a lousy bastard, he knew how to work people, how to be successful.

"You're right, Dad."

"What?" His father stopped in the middle of the room, nearly losing one of his slippers, apparently shocked by the words Mason had never said to him before.

"You're right—it's time to get things straight."

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Ellie was going to have a baby. One drunken blunder in the back of a musty Volkswagen van, and there she was, laid out on a cold examination table, being told she was pregnant. Dr. Martin, her family physician who'd known her since she was ten, standing over her open legs, shaking his head, thinking she was a whore. Thinking about how he was going to go home and tell his wife all about little Ellie Wilson, the nineteen year old girl who'd come from a great family, who'd had everything going for her, who'd gotten knocked up and ruined her life. And then all of Garner would be talking about it, about her, about her poor Christian parents and how ashamed they must be of such a disgraceful, unwed, pregnant daughter. Signing out of the office, even the receptionist seemed to give her a dirty look. *Dr. Martin must 've already told her. He's probably calling my parents right now. That bastard.*

Ellie spotted Betsy Mitchell, one of those old gossipy girls from Garner Senior High School, sitting in the waiting room, reading a crumpled issue of *Vogue*. She tried to slip past her, but the girl looked up from her magazine just in time to catch her at the door.

"Well, hey! How are you?" Betsy jumped to her feet, bright-eyed but not inquisitive. She didn't seem to know...yet.

*Just wait until you see the doctor. I'm sure he 'll tell you, too. And then you 'll tell everyone you know. Soon the whole state of North Carolina, the whole country, will be talking about me.*

When Ellie didn't say anything, Betsy grabbed her hand. "Hey, you ok? Bad news or something?"

People like Betsy lived for other people's bad news. "No. Just a check-up."

"That's what I'm in for, too. You know I barely see you any more.. you still at NC State?"

"Yeah."

"You're so lucky. I'm at Wake Tech, and it's just so embarrassing that all my friends are at big universities and I'm stuck here." She paused for a second and then laughed. "I think everyone just assumes I'll do the Garner-girl thing and get pregnant."

Ellie felt her cheeks tingling, her neck breaking out in warm red splotches of anger. She clenched her fingers into a fist, but stopped herself from hitting the girl.

*Breathe... 1... 2... 3. You don't fight when you 're pregnant.*

"I have to go."

Ellie bolted out the door to the parking lot and, after crawling into her Honda, scrambled through her CD book until she found Madonna. She cranked the car, popped in the disc, and skipped through the tracks to "Papa Don't Preach," figuring she could finally relate—though, to Ellie's knowledge, Madonna hadn't actually had a baby back then, and if she had, she certainly hadn't kept it like she said in the song. And even if she

had had one and kept it, she had been at least twenty-three and that was certainly a more acceptable age to be pregnant than nineteen.

The fifteen-minute drive back to her apartment was a blur of emotion. At first she felt anger. *How could I have let this happen? How could Mason have taken advantage of me when I was so drunk?* Then, when that stage was over, came the self-pity. *Why me? Why do I deserve this? Jesus Christ, why was I ever born?* And finally, acceptance. *Holy shit, I'm going to be a mother. I've got to quit smoking.* She grabbed the half-full pack of Marlboro Lights out of her purse and tossed it in the large green dumpster before making her way up the stairs to her apartment.

Ellie analyzed her naked body in the oak Cheval mirror, rubbing her hands across her tender breasts and stomach, noticing every slightly swollen difference. There was no going back now. She'd never agreed with abortion and giving her kid to a stranger was out of the question. Her parents could be disappointed all they wanted, but eventually the joy of becoming grandparents would overshadow the shame. And if the Betsy Mitchells and Dr. Martins in town had something to say, let them talk. She was going to be the best mother the world had ever seen.

But there was still the issue of telling Mason. She had done a good job of forgetting about him over the past month and a half, and he wasn't the type of guy she could really picture being with or, for that matter, raising a child. She couldn't even imagine what Kristine would say. Even still, it seemed wrong not to tell him.

After grabbing a clean towel from the top of her closet, Ellie walked to the bathroom, determined to come to a decision by the time she'd finished taking a shower.



Her stereo was sitting on the toilet, and she switched it to the radio setting before pulling back the neon green shower curtain and running the water. An advertisement about a Christmas sale at Sears blared from the stereo. Ellie had almost forgotten it was December, and smiled comparing herself to Mary and Christ and thought, perhaps, this baby was her gift from heaven, maybe a gift to the world. She sat down on the edge of the tub and, for the first time in a long while, prayed. *God, I'm sorry about this whole pregnancy thing. Please give me a sign, tell me what to do. Let a song come on or something. Thanks. Amen.*

Seconds after saying 'amen,' the familiar beats of Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean" began playing. At first, it seemed like God was rejecting her heaven's gift theory, but, frowning at the thought, she quickly decided it must mean Mason would deny the baby even if she did tell him. So it was settled; she was going to do this on her own. *It's 2007, anyway—women don't need men's help.*

When Ellie got out of the shower, she sprawled out on her twin-sized bed, picked up the phone receiver from the night stand and, with a trembling hand, called Kristine.

"Got some news."

Kristine was quiet on the other end of the phone. "Is it good news?"

"Depends. How do you feel about babies?"

"You mean..."

"Yep."

Silence.

And then excited squeals and giggles. "Oh my God! I'm going to be an aunt!"

Ellie laughed a little, and then hesitantly reminded Kristine of the problem. "You remember whose kid it is, though, right?"

"Oh shit, I forgot about that. Jesus, Ellie, what are you going to do? You aren't going to tell him are you?"

Ellie twisted the phone cord around her finger. "No.. .no.. .I don't think so."

"Good," Kristine said firmly. "It would be criminal to let that guy come near your child."

The girls chatted a few minutes longer about how it felt to be pregnant. They discussed body changes, menstrual cycles, food cravings.. .anything Kristine had ever heard about pregnancy. It was a little annoying to be treated like a science project, but Ellie felt better to have told someone. And she knew she would've asked the same questions had their roles been reversed. After hanging up the phone, Ellie fluffed her pillow and wrapped her warm down comforter around her body. It was nice to have an excuse to sleep during the day.

Ellie waited until they'd all finished opening presents on Christmas morning to tell her parents the news; their reactions weren't too surprising. Her mother crouched down on the floor and cried hysterically, twisting and untwisting the sparkling scraps of gold wrapping paper scattered around her. Through the sobs, she managed to choke out a few questions, which weren't so much questions as much as accusations and guilt trips.

"How could you do this? What were you thinking? Don't you know you're just a baby yourself?"

Her father stormed out the living room, nearly toppling over the Christmas tree as he brushed past it. Two red glass-ball ornaments fell from the branches, shattering in thin razor shards on the hardwood floor, but neither Ellie nor her mother made any move to clean up the mess. She heard the front door slam and then the rumble of her dad's Buick cranking up, the squealing of tires as he reversed out of the driveway. *Just needs time to clear his head.*

For a few minutes, Ellie tried to calm her mom down, but it was useless. The woman needed to vent, and there was nothing Ellie could say or do to help. So she nestled into the couch, switched on the television and turned up the volume to drown out the blubbing. *"How the Grinch Stole Christmas"... how appropriate. If the Grinch had been a woman, he could've just gotten pregnant and told his parents.* She reached into the crystal candy dish sitting beside her on the end table and popped a few M&Ms in her mouth. *Now we wait.* Her mother hugged out a heavy sigh, a few sniffles, and then dramatically hauled her body up from the floor and stumped to the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Alone in the living room, Ellie quietly sang a series of Christmas carols, hoping the little fetus inside of her could hear.

It was about an hour before Ellie heard her dad pulling back into the driveway. She sat up on her knees and peeked at him through the window as he strode across the lawn. He was tall and muscular and still very handsome for fifty-year-old man. Other than the little tufts of gray above his ears, his hair was completely black. She laughed thinking about how people always mistook him for Burt Reynolds. *He really doesn't look like a grandfather.* When he walked up the stairs and out of view, Ellie plopped

back down on the couch and turned off the television. A few seconds later he appeared in the doorway, smiled, and after maneuvering around the sharp bits of ornaments, sat beside her on the couch.

"Sorry I left. I just needed to.. .to get my thoughts together."

"Well you always do that when you're upset. I wasn't too surprised."

He laughed, grabbed her knee and squeezed. "Oh, Kiddo..."

"Yeah. I know."

"I could lecture you, but I guess there's nothing I could say that you haven't already thought about, huh?"

"Probably not."

"Well..." he said, scratching the side of his head. "How's your mom doing?"

"Still crying, I guess. She's in your room, door shut."

"She's always been emotional about you growing up." He chuckled. "Remember your graduation?"

Ellie felt the tears welling up in her eyes. "This isn't graduation, Dad."

He pulled her close to his chest and she broke down. They sat that way for what felt like hours, her crying, him stroking her hair, neither of them saying anything. Ellie felt more like a child than she had in years, realizing her mother was right—she *was* just a baby herself. Realizing her child would never know the comfort of a father, especially not one like hers. Realizing she had no idea of what she was going to do.

Ellie finally raised her head when she heard the squeak of the bedroom door opening. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her sweater. "Damn hormones."

Her mother didn't come back to the living room right away, but instead went to the kitchen. Though, a few seconds later, she walked in, broom and dustpan in hand.

"Just thought we should get this glass up before someone steps on it. Can't have our new mother getting all cut up, can we?" She smiled, and Ellie knew things were going to be okay.

That night, as Ellie scarfed down her honey-glazed ham, mashed potato, and biscuit dinner (skipping on the green bean casserole, the smell alone making her feel nauseated), she listened to her parents' advice, knowing some day her own child would come to her for guidance. They thought it best for Ellie to drop out of school and get a job, at least until she could save enough money for night classes. Her father's best friend, Ed Carlson, was the principal at Vandora Springs Elementary School, and he had been looking for a receptionist. He'd always been fond of Ellie, so they assumed he'd let her fill the position.

"And, of course, you'll move back in with us," her mother said, her dad nodding in agreement.

"Wait...what?"

"Well, you can't expect to afford an apartment and a baby and day care, can you?"

Now, had you waited for the right man..."

"I told you I was drugged!"

Her dad held up his butter knife. "About that. Who is that little piece of..."

"Listen. It's not important. And that's not the point!"

"No, the point is you're in no position to live alone." Her mother smirked and raised her eyebrow. "Am I right?"

Ellie looked down at her plate and scooped a big spoonful of potatoes. "Yeah. I guess."

"Exactly. You and the baby can have the basement."

After dinner, Ellie's parents loaded her car with boxes to pack her stuff into. They asked her to stay the night with them, but she wanted to sleep in her own bed, in her own apartment, even if it was Christmas. She kissed her mom and dad good-bye and drove home to be alone, knowing that, in less than seven months, she wouldn't have many opportunities to do so.

Ellie started her job at Vandora Springs a few weeks after New Years. Ed Carlson greeted her at the front glass door, and she had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing at his outfit—banana-colored slacks, white collared shirt, and a cherry-red tie. With his shaggy, fudge-brown hair, he looked like a walking ice cream sundae.

Mr. Carlson tilted his head to look her in the face. "So.. .are you doing all right?"

She smiled and nodded. "Doing just fine. I really appreciate you arranging this job for me."

He grabbed her hand and looked her in the eyes. "Anything you need, you just let someone know. I hope you don't mind, but I told a few of the ladies around here about your.. .situation. They're willing to help."

"Jesus, Mr. Carlson. I'm pregnant, not dying." She playfully slapped his shoulder.

"Well, you have some difficult circumstances. I just want you to know you're not alone."

Mr. Carlson walked Ellie to the office and held the wooden door to let her pass through. A gray-haired woman with green wide-rimmed glasses was sitting at the front desk holding a little girl, who couldn't have been more than six, in her lap. The youngster's curly red hair was pulled into a side ponytail, and she was wearing a purple polka dotted dress, a furry white coat, and lavender stockings. Her lips were poked out and tiny tears rolled down her pale, freckled cheeks.

"Hey there, Meredith. You ok, sweetie?" Mr. Carlson spoke softly to the child.

The little girl clung to the old woman's neck, hiding her face.

The woman smiled and patted Meredith's head. "She's feeling a little sick in her tummy today. We're just waiting for her mama."

"Well feel better, honey." Mr. Carlson looked down at his watch. "Oh goodness. I'm sorry to be quick with the introduction, but I've got to get to a meeting. Judy, this is Ellie Wilson, your new office helper."

Judy smiled and winked. "I'm so glad you're here. As soon as Meredith's mom gets here, I'll show you around. You can just go take a seat by the window over there for now if you'd like.

After shaking hands with Mr. Carlson and thanking him again, Ellie did as she was told. She looked around the office, thinking that, with the flowery wallpaper, the framed posters of puppies and kittens, and the smell of crayons, it felt exactly like her old elementary school. Even Judy, with her wrinkled face and gentle smile, seemed typical. *The only thing that's out of place is me.* Ellie stared out the window at the cars passing by on Vandora Springs Road, some obeying the twenty-mile per hour school zone, others ignoring. She wanted to be in her Honda, driving anywhere.

The phone rang and Judy picked up. "Vandora Springs Elementary. This is Judy."

While Judy talked on the phone, Meredith eyed Ellie and then crawled down and meandered over. She wasn't crying any more, but she wasn't smiling either.

"Well hey there."

The girl didn't speak, but raised her arms out. Ellie swooped her up in her lap and bounced her knees up and down. Meredith giggled and then turned around to look Ellie in the face.

"What's your name?" Meredith had slight lisp and the usual Garner southern drawl.

"El—eh—Miss Wilson."

"You're pretty."

"Well thank you. I think you're very pretty, too." *Maybe this won't be so bad.*

"I know."

A few seconds later, a large red-haired woman, wearing gray sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt clomped into the office.

"Mommy!" Meredith hopped down from Ellie's lap and skipped to her mother.

With Judy still on the phone, Ellie didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry, I'm new. Do you know if there's a sheet you're supposed to sign or something?"

The woman looked Ellie up and down, and then laughed mockingly. "You're new? You mean you work here? You look like you should still be in school yourself."



*You fat bitch.* Ellie felt her angry neck splotches rising; luckily, Judy hung up the phone and called Meredith's mother over to the desk before Ellie had time to say anything she'd regret. The woman signed a form and then left the office, her poor little daughter tagging along behind her.

Judy gave a sympathetic smile. "Sorry. She's awful. It's hard to believe a beautiful girl like that came out of her."

"No kidding."

"You'll get used to dealing with rude parents. There are a lot of good ones too, and they make up for it."

The rest of the day, Judy showed Ellie around the office, gave her a tour of the school (consequently, she learned the smell of cafeteria pizza made her vomit), introduced her to a few teachers, and her instructions about her daily duties: typing up school newsletters, parental notices, etc.; answering phones; taking out trash; dealing with sick kids. It was all pretty easy and Ellie caught on after a couple of weeks, though it wasn't quite the career she'd planned for herself. But, then again, there were a lot of things she hadn't planned on. The days, and weeks, and months flew, and by the time Ellie started to show, it was time for summer vacation.

Living in her parents' basement wasn't too bad of a set-up—there was nice furniture, good meals, and, best of all, it was free. Since the hysteria at Christmas, her mom and dad had actually seemed to grow even closer, constantly hugging and calling each other Grandpa and Granny. It was nice to see them so happy, but it often reminded Ellie of just how alone she was. All of her close friends had moved away for college, and

there certainly weren't any love prospects. When she was working it didn't bother her so much, but now that she had so much free time, she couldn't seem to shake it from her mind. She'd sigh and rub her belly. *Just you and me, baby.*

Finally, in July, Ellie got a call from Kristine.

"Oh my God! Are you home?"

"Yeah, we just walked in the door."

"We?"

"Oh yeah, Steven came back with me. We want to come see you, Preggers!"

*Great.* It wasn't bad enough that Steven had stolen her best friend, now she had to see them all kissy-huggy in their loving glory.

"We'll be there in a few minutes."

Ellie hung up the phone and slunk down on the futon, propping her swollen feet on the coffee table. She was a little hungry, but it took too much effort to get her big belly all the way up the stairs. She grabbed one of her parenting magazines off the end table and flipped through the pages, looking at all the pregnant women, happy fathers, and smiling babies. She started to read an article about the best breathing techniques during labor, but, seeing that a man wrote it, she flung the magazine across the room. *What does he know about going into labor?*

Ellie heard the doorbell ring and she waited for her mother to answer it. A few seconds later, Kristine came running down the stairs, Steven at her heels. She threw her hands in the air and screamed when she saw Ellie, and then bent down for a tight hug.

"You're huge!"

"Yep. I'm an elephant."

Kristine giggled and twirled her curly brown hair around her finger. She looked young in her tight pink tank top and short black mini-skirt. She looked like Ellie was supposed to.

"Jesus, it's baby central down here," Steven said, looking around the room at the stroller, crib, changing table, mounds of diapers, and piles of baby clothes.

"Mom went just a little overboard with the baby shower."

Kristin stared at Ellie and joyful tears came pouring out of her deep brown eyes.

"Oh, you're going to be a mamma!" Then she looked over her shoulder at Steven. "And we'll be god parents!"

Ellie raised her eyebrow and smirked. "Wellyou will. We'll have to wait and see about him." *That would be just my luck—I die and the happy lovers get my baby.*

Steven grinned, grabbing Kristine's hand and spinning her around to face him.

"You want to tell her?"

"Tell me what?"

Kristine put out her left hand; a small diamond sparkled on her finger. "We're engaged!" She jumped up and down and smacked a kiss on Steven's cheek.

*Holy shit.* "Aren't you guys a little—a little young for that?"

Kristine looked at her curiously and propped her hands on her hips. "Well, aren't you a little young for *that!*"

"Excuse me." Ellie felt the vomit rising in her throat, and she hauled her body off the futon and scurried to the bathroom. She made it just in time. Although it was mainly just water and bile, Ellie continued to gag.

She heard Kristine tapping on the door. "I think we should go. I'll come back later, okay?"

"Congratulations."

When her stomach quit heaving, Ellie rocked back and forth on the cold linoleum floor. She felt bad that she hadn't at least pretended to be happy for her friend. It wasn't Kristine's fault all this had happened, and everyone had assumed she'd marry Steven eventually. *But why now? Why does she get to have someone and I don't? I'm the pregnant one! God, what am I going to do?*

Everything seemed to be hitting her at the same time. *A single mother secretary living in my parents' basement? That can't be my life.* Ellie braced herself against the toilet and hoisted her body. *I can't raise this baby by myself.* She washed her hands, wiped her face, and opened the medicine cabinet. Nothing there but Band-aids, calamine lotion, and an empty bottle of aspirin. There was a razor on the edge of the tub. *Too messy.* She reached down and opened the cabinet under the sink. Clorox could do it. Ellie grabbed the bottle, unscrewed the top, and with trembling hands began to raise it to her mouth. She closed her eyes, preparing to take a sip, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was too late to do this kind of thing. *And who's ever heard of suicide by Clorox?*

Ellie lifted her shirt and looked down at her smooth, round belly. In less than a month, her life would change forever—and she didn't want to do it alone. Maybe Mason wasn't the best candidate for a father, but who else would want to be with her now? She'd be lucky if *he 'd* even want to; after all, having avoided Raleigh for the past nine months, she didn't even know where he was. But it was at least worth trying.

- 3 -

Mason woke up to his pager beeping and vibrating on the dresser. He switched on his bedside lamp and looked at the clock, squinting his tired eyes as they adjusted to the light. *Three in the morning. Fucking hell.* Grabbing his wrinkled blue work shirt off the floor, he sluggishly slid it on over his head, trapping underneath the collar a few strands of hair that'd fallen loose from his ponytail—he didn't bother to free them. He pulled up his khaki pants, fastened his belt, and then tugged his leather boots onto his feet and tied the laces. Mason had been working as a maintenance man at the Walnut Ridge apartment complex for nearly a year, but these late night calls hadn't gotten any easier.

He called the maintenance line and Leroy, a black man who had to be about sixty-five, picked up the phone. He'd been working for the company for ages, but Mason had quickly realized that he never actually went out on calls—just ordered everyone else to do it.

"Yeah, boy. We got some plumbing trouble. Candace Truelove, Apartment 3200 E," the old man said in his low, raspy voice.

*"We got plumbing trouble, or / got plumbing trouble?"*

Leroy laughed himself into a cough. "It's all you, son. Don't worry, though. Sounds like a nice young woman. 3200 E."

Mason smiled. *I guess I can't blame the old guy.* "Okay, I'm going. But I swear to God if I have to plunge out one more damn tampon I'm going to quit."

Leroy was still laughing when he hung up the phone, and Mason couldn't help feeling a little bad for him. Still having to play go-between at this hour, when most other old men were sleeping.

*Candace... Candace...* Mason had met almost everyone in the complex, but he couldn't remember her. He looked at himself in the mirror, adjusting his collar and straightening his ponytail, and made sure to grab his tool belt and a plunger before leaving the apartment.

Mason parked his company issued golf cart at the 3200 building, clicked off the engine, and hopped out. Climbing the stairs he could hear funky jazz music blaring louder and louder as he came closer to E. *This should be fun.*

He had to knock several times before the lanky girl opened the door. Her hair was pulled into two long braids, and was wearing corduroy overalls made from multicolored patches over a tight white t-shirt. Although her outfit was strange, she was very pretty—dark, tanned skin, big chocolate eyes, and a perfect button nose.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here!" She shouted over the music in a high pitched voice, grabbing Mason's hands and pulling him in through the doorway. "My toilet's broken."

"Do you know what time it is? You've got to turn your music down. I can't believe no one's complained yet," he said, stepping into her dimly lit apartment.

"Oh, it's fine. They all like me," she said, grinning widely.

Mason first noticed the strong smell of incense burning, patchouli or maybe Nag Champa. She had no furniture in the living room, just a few pillows and a wooden coffee table base without a top. Along the walls were brightly colored tapestries, and on the ceiling she'd hung a poster of Jimmy Hendrix. A large stereo was pushed up against the wall, and Mason walked over and turned down the volume before asking the girl the problem.

"I don't know.. I can't get the toilet to flush. I plunged it and everything, but the handle just jiggles. It's broken." She smiled and skipped down the hallway to the messy bathroom, pointing to the porcelain bowl.

Having to first move a wet blue towel and some damp magazines to the sink, Mason opened the lid of the toilet tank. *You 've got to be kidding me. All the way out here for this?*

Taking off his watch and rolling up his sleeves, Mason sighed to emphasize his annoyance.

"Okay, you see this chain?" he huffed, lifting it from the cold water. "It came detached from the flapper.. that's that rubber thing. You just slip it back on like this."

"Ew, you just put your bare hands in toilet water."

*This is the stupidest human being I've ever met.* "No.. no.. this is clean water."

"Whatever, man. I wouldn't put my hands in there."

The girl walked out of the bathroom, leaving Mason to put the lid back on the tank. He wiped his wet hands on his pants and put his watch back on. A few seconds later she peeked her head back in, tilting it against the doorframe so all Mason could see was her nose, eyes, forehead, and one swinging braid.

Mason couldn't help laughing. "Good God, girl. What are you on? Don't you know it's almost four in the morning?"

She hopped into the doorway. "You know, I've seen you around the complex.. .driving on your golf cart. I've always wanted to talk to you."

Mason nodded and smiled as he moved past her out of the bathroom. *I've got to get out of here.* But walking down the hallway, she stepped back in front of him and put out her hand. "My name's Candace, but my friends back home call me Ace."

"Mason," he said shaking her hand. "Where's back home?"

"In Asheville. You want to see pictures?"

Without giving him time to say no, Ace hooked her arm around Mason and led him to a pillow in the middle of the living room, pointing for him to sit-down. Then she ran to a room in the back and returned with a shoebox full of pictures. Flopping down beside him and sitting Indian-style, Ace picked up the first rubber-banded bundle and handed it to Mason.

"I'll explain them as we go."

Mason woke up the next afternoon on a pile of pillows, Ace's head lying across his stomach. Judging by the empty shoebox and all the photographs strewn about on the



floor, Mason assumed she'd gone through every one of them; though he was pretty sure he hadn't stayed awake for them all.

He looked at Ace sleeping, her braids stretched across her chest, one of her overall hooks unfastened, a little line of drool seeping from her mouth, and Mason, as he always did, thought about Ellie—how strange she must have felt waking up to him in the van that morning. He didn't blame her for sneaking out. *But...if she 'd have just given me a chance, she would've seen that I got my life together.* Ace squirmed a little and Mason brushed his hand across her cheek. *She must see in me what I saw in her.* He'd grown up a lot in the past year, he knew, and maybe this girl just needed someone to talk to. His own road to clarity had been a pretty friendless affair; even with his father getting him a job, he still had had to do the anger-management and drug classes on his own, not to mention all of the grief counseling. Ace was obviously lonely; maybe she just needed someone to help her. *Maybe she's the one.*

Ace opened her dreary eyes and smiled up at him, wiping the drool off her chin with one arm and stretching out the other.

"I'm glad you're already awake," she said, sitting up with a yawn. "Now we can finish going through the pictures."

*Then again, maybe not.*

He told her he was sorry but he had a dentist appointment he really couldn't miss. She begged him to stay a little longer, maybe get some breakfast, watch a movie, talk. Mason apologized again, pointing to his watch and shrugging his shoulders. He was lucky to have gotten out of there before she had a chance to ask for his number.

Mason drove the golf cart up the hilly street to the Walnut Ridge community office. The bell jingled as he walked through the glass door and the manager, Belinda, a short, round middle-aged woman with dyed auburn hair and bright pink eye shadow, looked up at him from her desk. The wrinkles around her mouth grew as she smiled and gave him a wink.

"So Leroy tells me you met Ace last night—how'd it go?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I don't even want to talk about it."

"You know she comes in here all the time, the crazy girl. I don't think she has any friends."

"Some people are lonely for a reason," he said, walking past her desk to the back of the office.

Mason picked up his work orders from a paper tray on the counter and thumbed through the pile of requests; the list went on and on, ranging from a broken lock at 3301 A, to a leaking faucet at 3400 C, to a rumbling dishwasher at 3000 J. Day in and day out, Mason was fixing everyone else's problems; but he couldn't complain too much. It was nice to finally be giving help rather than asking for it.

The front door bells chimed and Mason heard Belinda's chair roll back across the hardwood floors as she jumped up, making cooing and kissing noises.

"Oh my goodness!" she squealed. "Look how precious! Aren't you the cutest little thing ever?"

He glanced away from his papers and looked down at the stroller, though Belinda's large rump was hunched over it, blocking the baby from view. *Probably looks just like any other baby.*

Mason went back to organizing his work orders, shifting the papers from most important to least, but stopped when he heard a soft familiar voice speaking lowly to Belinda. *It can't be.* It was Ellie.

He dropped the papers from his hands and they scattered about the floor. Stepping over them he crossed the room towards the girl he hadn't seen in almost a year, but who he had thought about nearly every day, the girl who had unknowingly sparked a change in him. He stared at her and she stared back at him, neither of them smiling or frowning or saying anything. As he came closer, Belinda stepped away from the stroller and Ellie came out from behind it, her hands folded in front of her. Mason squatted down, still looking at her.

Ellie's voice cracked a little as she spoke. "I think we should talk."

"Yeah," Mason said. "I think it's about time."