



UC
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A Man Needs a Woman

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Now we were packing all our clothes in the tiny room with matching yellow velveteen bedspread and curtains, leaving again, and I didn't think I made it into the competition to be Miss Junior Indy because I'm still twelve and don't have my period so I'm not as curvy as some of the other girls. But James said "You did your best," and not to worry about the money for the motel because I would win another pageant and make us double the money someday. We didn't know where we were going next, but we took the alarm clock from the night table anyway, and wrapped it up in the hand towels and stuffed the pillowcases with mini soap and shampoo and razors when they had them.


I took the air freshener and hangers out of the closet, covered with tissue paper — *The Sandpiper Motel* in curly letters — a place that was nowhere at all, but faced the huge empty racetrack with its figure-eights and empty, scarred bleachers. The Bibles were the only things we never took, but there were no Bibles in the drawers, no stationary, no telephone books or pens. The man at the front desk said there was no pizza delivery, but the closest town had a Chicken Chief but we said we never heard of it. If we wanted to watch TV we had to pay \$15 for an antenna that would connect us to Chicago and even that was 300 miles away. I was drinking chocolate milk with a bendy straw and eating big feet and hot lips from my pocket.

“I hope it’s warm where we’re going,” I told him.

I fixed my eyes on an old boot stain on the carpet and thought about where a hot place was. In all the times James had taken me traveling we never got to a hot place. I thought about Mary Mumford at my old school, who got to go on vacations and how she was always brown when she came back, cornrows in her blond hair. When we played kissing tag Mary Mumford was the one who all the boys wanted to kiss. She was such a fast runner so she never got captured. When the boys captured me they always let me go without kissing me and I never knew why.

Before my Mom died I liked being a model and all the people taking my photo. I didn’t mind wearing the make-up like some of the girls and I knew how to make my lips look like a bowtie, coloring them pink like the bottom of a bunny’s foot. I used to take tap so I knew what to do in the competition. But things were different now because our house was gone and James said he wanted me to be a model and make it big before I was fourteen and dumpy or had pimples. Even though I wanted to be famous I was tired of all the cold places we were going and I just wanted to live in an apartment with a pool and stay in one place where we wouldn’t always be packing.

“Is it a hot place where we’re going to?” I asked quietly and I slurped the last of my milk to get his attention more. He was in the bathroom with its bright, white lights going through his toilet bag and counting all our money, rolls of it with rubber bands around them, next to the spritz bottle of cologne and his soap



that smelled like old trees. All our money smelled like old trees and I wondered if it would be enough to get us somewhere hot. James looked up and smiled at me. He put all the money into the dry sink where he was counting it and came over to me.

“Princess,” he said and held his hand out to me. I went to him, past the bulky old Zenith TV. The sharp edge of the bed with the yellow bedspread and onto his knees where I put my head into his neck and smelled the old cigarettes, the old trees and stared at the tattoo of a jangly skeleton opening up his black cape that showed bones.

He sat down on the edge of the bathtub and put me on his knee and told me to hold still and then brushed my hair with his fingers and then braided it slowly and very carefully, but then undid it.

“It was bad,” he said. “I still can’t do it well.”

“You do,” I insisted. “You do them as good as her’s, only different.”

I picked at the hearts on my tights, thinking that if a lie comes from a good place it can’t be that bad. James’ voice sounded faraway all of a sudden.

“Are you hungry?” he asked me. “Or just happy that we’re going?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I don’t care.”

“Oh come on, you do. You wanted to leave the last place because there was no mall to go to or no movie theatres, no nothing.”

“I am hungry,” I said. “We skipped dinner last night.”

He ruffled my hair, kissed my nose. His skin smelled strong and sweet, like candy and a doctor's office. His ponytail slid to the side of his shoulder.

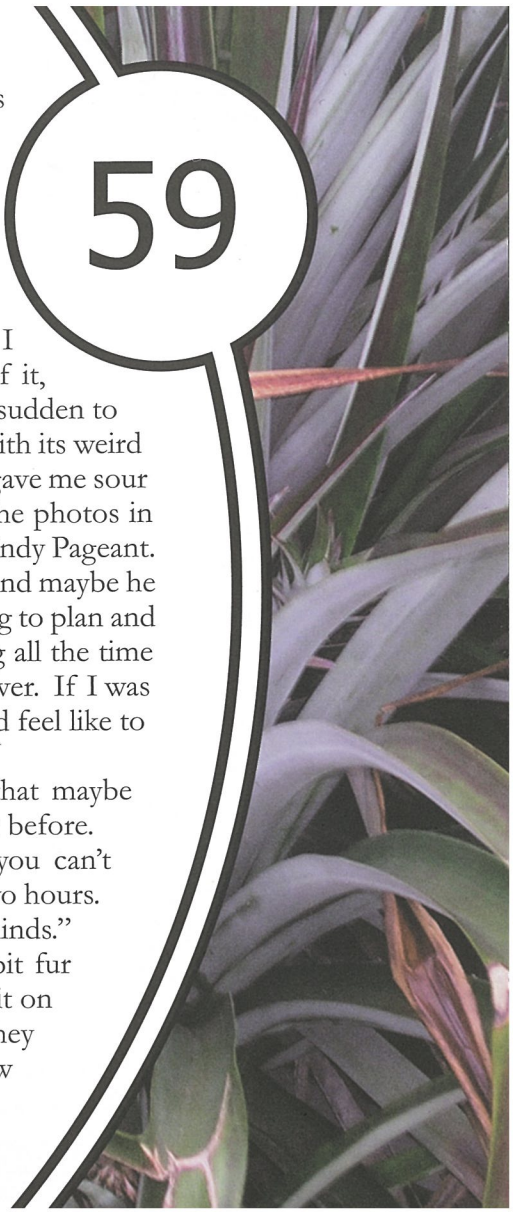
"I fell asleep and I *am* sorry, but now it's breakfast time and I promised you pancakes. No more donuts for my little miss."

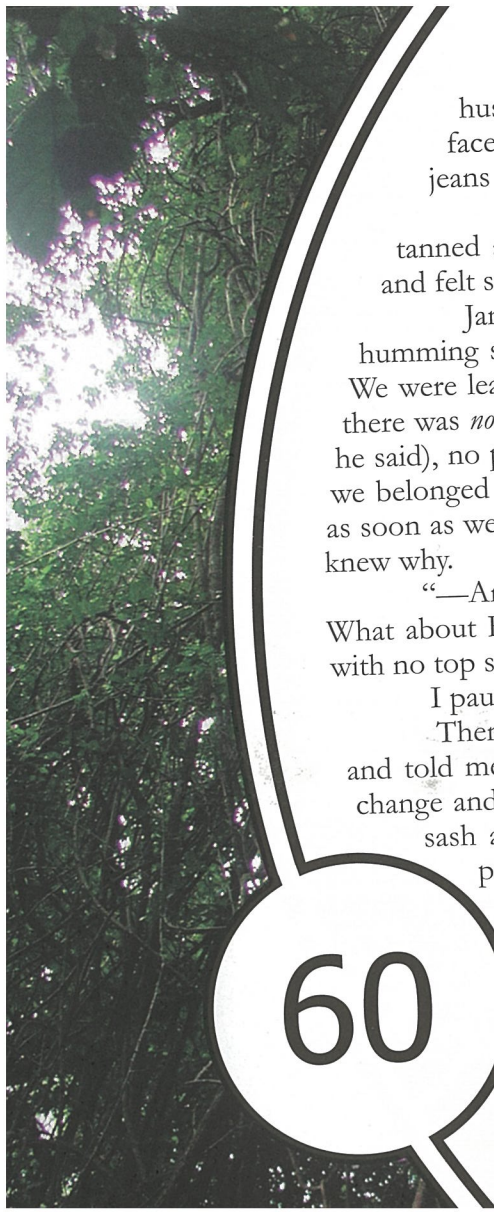
But he looked too serious for pancakes. I went back to the bed and sat down on the middle of it, picked at the lint balls and paisley. I felt sad all of a sudden to be leaving again, especially when I liked this motel with its weird old furniture and Indian man at the front desk who gave me sour gums or Popeye cigarettes. I didn't care about all the photos in the trunk or about being a model at the Junior Miss Indy Pageant. James was pulling rubber bands around our money and maybe he wasn't listening. He was in charge and had everything to plan and that's why a Man Needs a Woman. If he's planning all the time he's got to have somewhere nice to go when it's all over. If I was older I would understand. I wondered what it would feel like to be thirteen. I wanted to be thirteen badly.

"Is India hot?" I said suddenly, thinking that maybe what we should do is just get farther away than ever before.

"India," James answered, "is so hot that you can't walk on the sand until midnight and only then for two hours. You've got to do your life in darkness but no one minds."

He came onto the bed and pulled my rabbit fur coat out of my suitcase and handed it to me. I put it on and then he combed my hair with his fingers. They moved so slowly, raking my hair like wheat, like how my mother's hair was, shiny and straight as the





husks by the highway. His breath was honey on my face and he rocked me against his hard body in its rough jeans and the big belt buckle dug into my back.

“By the time my birthday comes I want to be tanned and brown and get braids in my hair—” I began and felt surer of it as soon as I heard my own words.

James held me tightly and rocked me against him, humming softly. He was happy, he would listen to me now. We were leaving this town because I’d lost the Miss Indy and there was *no place for a man to hang his hat in this town* (that’s what he said), no place for a little Miss like me, this *filthy dive*—where we belonged was somewhere *where we could be fresh and free*. But as soon as we got to one place we would leave again and I never knew why.

“—And,” I continued, “I want to live in a hot place next. What about Florida or Hollywood? That way we can get a car with no top so it would be cheaper.”

I paused and ate a mini teeth and jelly coke bottle.

Then I got confused because James slid me off his knee and told me to put out my hand and then he gave me all his change and told me to go put on my nice dress with the gold sash and to go down to the restaurant and order some pancakes for me and a coffee for him and that he would come along in a few minutes. He had last minute things to do.

I opened up my suitcase and took out my special party dress. The gold was starting to flake off but I was supposed to get a new dress next time we passed through a town with a Zellers. I put it on and then figured I should wear my party

shoes too. I slid them on and did up the buckle.

“Can you tie the sash?” Then, “Please, I mean.”

He came and tied it, but he wasn’t humming anymore. He looked very sad.

“Just order me a coffee and wait.”

“With two cream and two sugar.” I knew this by heart.

He shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I closed up my suitcase and made sure Pony bear was face-up so he could breathe. Then I put the suitcase back against the radiator.

“Don’t talk to anyone in there,” James said, and pushed me gently to the door and opened it. He looked around at the empty parking lot a few times. His eyes were very red.

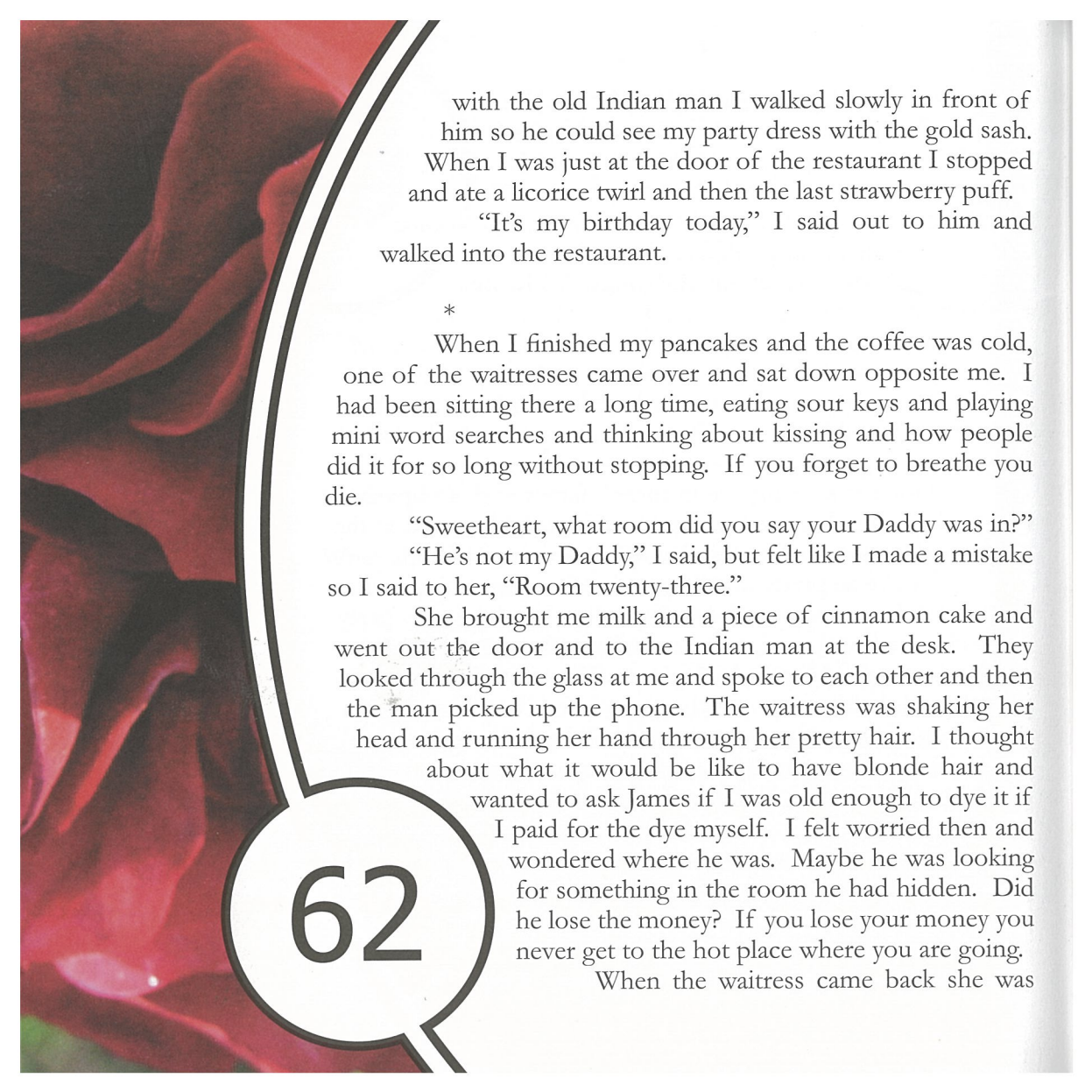
“You’re so pretty now,” he said and stared at his shoes.

I didn’t turn around, just kept clip-clopping in my party shoes that had heels and made me taller. The tall girls are the girls who win the Miss Indy Pageant. The tall girls with their periods and their curves and their good braids snaking down their backs. It was November and I still didn’t have a winter jacket. Maybe no one bought me one because where we were going I wouldn’t need it. He called after me again, louder this time.

“Just wait there. Order pancakes and be a good girl—”

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When I passed the reception desk



with the old Indian man I walked slowly in front of him so he could see my party dress with the gold sash. When I was just at the door of the restaurant I stopped and ate a licorice twirl and then the last strawberry puff.

“It’s my birthday today,” I said out to him and walked into the restaurant.

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When I finished my pancakes and the coffee was cold, one of the waitresses came over and sat down opposite me. I had been sitting there a long time, eating sour keys and playing mini word searches and thinking about kissing and how people did it for so long without stopping. If you forget to breathe you die.

“Sweetheart, what room did you say your Daddy was in?”

“He’s not my Daddy,” I said, but felt like I made a mistake so I said to her, “Room twenty-three.”

She brought me milk and a piece of cinnamon cake and went out the door and to the Indian man at the desk. They looked through the glass at me and spoke to each other and then the man picked up the phone. The waitress was shaking her head and running her hand through her pretty hair. I thought about what it would be like to have blonde hair and wanted to ask James if I was old enough to dye it if

I paid for the dye myself. I felt worried then and wondered where he was. Maybe he was looking for something in the room he had hidden. Did he lose the money? If you lose your money you never get to the hot place where you are going.

When the waitress came back she was

holding my suitcase. She laid it gently on the floor beside me. There was the sound of a car coming up and many men walking by the open door of the restaurant. I wished I wasn't wearing my party dress because now my legs would be cold if I had to wait in the police station. The waitress picked up my empty glass of chocolate milk and leaned into me so I could smell her perfume that was coconuts and I wanted her to stay.

"You'll wait with me here for a while, okay?" she said and her eyes were dark and deep like the ladies that James went around with after my Mom died. But I didn't want him to be lonely so I didn't say anything. It was my Mom who told me that a Man Needs a Woman no matter what, so that's why I waited there with that waitress but I never did see James again except when they took him out, but then all I could see were his boots.

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