

Finders Keepers

I live with my aunt, and she lives with other peoples' belongings. Twirling wind chimes, speckled coasters, the porcelain ballerina music box tucked in my top dresser drawer, all belong elsewhere. Our house never feels whole, no matter how many things my aunt finds for us. She shuns visitors, because it's impossible to keep track of who might walk in and reclaim their missing treasures.

The town knows, though, and we're scrutinized when we enter stores. Overstuffed security guards armed with flashlights trail us, as if she's pedestrian enough to get caught. Apparently when I was still small enough to fit into a stroller, she wrapped me in blankets and stuffed things underneath me. I vaguely remember a man tearing off my layers like a hermit crab's soft belly separated from its shell. I don't know if this really happened or not, but the ripping sensation lingers.

Nothing in this world feels like it's mine.

"Your shoes look worn. We don't wear ratty things in this house." Aunt finesses freshly cut ropes of doughy pasta, her favorite food to make from scratch. When work and money are unnecessary, time spreads open like the universe.

"They're fine. I'll throw 'em in the wash."

"No, come here. Stand up straight." She dusts the flour from her hands on a coral apron with pictures of Florida across the hips and opens a cabinet underneath the breakfast nook. "Put your foot on here."

I slide off the sneaker and push hard against the metal. She borrowed the shoe sizer from a Footlocker three years back. In her world, if it's not chained down, it's fair game. A miserable lesson learned after she forgot to chain down her husband and another woman neatly carried him off.

"I knew it!" She raises the sizer in triumph. "Bigger feet, you need bigger sneakers. What color?"

I long to pick something ridiculous. Aubergine. Chartreuse. She'll drive forever and never find a store that carries them. Instead I acquiesce because I'm an ashamed teenager who believes theft is a lesser crime than high school embarrassment.

"Black. The black Chucks with a pattern on the tongue."

"Aren't we forgetting something?" The flour from the pasta whisks off her like snow as she forces me to beg.

"Please." *Please steal them for me.*

She nods and winks, washing her hands with the lemon-scented soap, a 'gift' from a restaurant in Tulnee, and returns to her pasta cobweb.

In the safety of my bedroom I line up outgrown shoes and sneakers and take a hard-bristled scrub brush to them, vigorously erasing stains and indications of wear. I run my fingers over braided laces, picking off fuzz, tightening the hard plastic ends. I tap heels together, removing dirt and grime, making them new again for the plastic Salvation Army sack. I need the original owners to find them. But if nothing else they'll be returned to the universe and off my conscience.

↔

The next afternoon new sneakers, laces coiled like cobras, wait on my bed.

"I have a date Saturday night, around seven. Will you feel safe here on your own?" Aunt asks with concern. I wonder if it's a date with a real man or a victim store.

"I guess, but I wouldn't mind company."

"Hmm. No boys, and definitely not Regina. I don't like the looks of her."

Regina, a slim fifteen-year-old, poses a serious threat. Her father owns Gregor's Grocery and Gifts. Of course Aunt doesn't want Regina in the house. We have mismatched potholders, pans and flower vases that belong to them.

“Sammi’s free,” I volunteer. Sammi, the loner, with no compunction about associating with the clepto’s kid.

“Why don’t you go over there? You’ll have a sleepover, oh, and you’ll need a new sleeping bag. I doubt Strawberry Shortcake is high school chic these days.” I imagine her discovering an out-of-the-way sporting goods store with a clerk who dozes behind the counter. She’ll easily slip in and ask him to check for something in the stock room and skillfully walk out with the bag tucked under her arm. Aunt enjoys sculpted muscles from years of gardening, cooking, and pilfering.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Sammi doesn’t do anything on the weekends. She brings home stacks from the library and gathers bits of trivia to help her succeed in college. She sleeps through high school and preserves her high expectations for an ivy-covered university better than our small town. Unless my Aunt can steal me a future I don’t believe in such things.

Saturday night, at Sammi’s house, I marvel at how precise and clean everything is. There is room to breathe and stretch without bumping into things. Her mother dances through the breezy living room.

We sleep in the family room on the carpeted floor next to the gas stove where my bones are toasted from the inside out, and the sound of her mother humming trickles down the air vents.

“Next time how about your house? It’s so boring here.” Sammi tucks a hieroglyphics book under her sleeping back and tosses popcorn towards my mouth, missing and bombarding my nose.

“Sure,” I lie. Aunt will never permit sleepovers or give anyone the opportunity to wander around, discovering our secret stashes. “I hope this isn’t a big deal. Do your parents mind guests?”

“This place is a hotel. My mom’s college roommate and her babies are upstairs. They come three or four times a year, used to live here, and it was always fun when they visited. Until the twins. Pain in the ass twins.”

On cue two small squeaks commence. There is something strangely comforting in their infant peeps.

“I’m great with babies,” I claim. Lying is my own brand of theft.

“Not those little monsters,” she murmurs, drifting off.

I head to the kitchen for water. I switch on the overhead light to get a better view of the room and discover a petite woman scrubbing baby bottles. She looks up at me, studies my sullen face and lurches back, disturbing a flower vase. She quickly scoops up the broken glass, cutting her hand in the process. The woman covers her mouth, inadvertently smearing blood on her cheek. It reminds me of *Lord of the Flies*.

“Susan,” she murmurs the way the wind shivers through naked winter trees.

“No.” I panic as the woman advances.

“Susan,” she persists, reaching for me.

“Please stay away.” The blood is on my arm now, and her grip is firm but strangely consoling.

“Susan, it’s your mother.”

“My mother’s dead. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Someone stole you from us. To find you here at my friend’s house. After all these years! I always knew you’d be returned to us.” The moment she says this, I believe but still struggle against her grasp.

“Look at this.” The woman frantically reaches for her purse hanging from a nearby wooden peg. She pulls out a wrinkled picture, a little girl in a cherry red dress gripping a blanket, smiling and laughing. With my eyes. My nose. “You’re my Susan. And you’re coming home.”

↔

“You know you’re not hers, sweetheart.” New Mother is soft-spoken and encouraging, fresh with lively blue eyes that study me the way an art connoisseur regards a painting. “You belong to us,” she reassures as we all stand at odds in the small kitchen.

Aunt is stricken, clutching her spatula and the mottled brown counter despite the police’s tight hold of her elbows. She shakes her head and pitches in all directions, trying to protect her stolen treasures. Aunt crumbles like poorly prepared pasta dough.

“How despicable Annie. We all knew you were disturbed, but how despicable to steal a child.” Officer Bowie slides the handcuffs around her nimble wrists, well aware she is a master at sleight of hand. “You should’ve been locked up long before now.”

“I remember you,” New Mother accuses, pointing a well-polished finger. “You cleaned our house the summer before you took Susan. Trinkets disappeared, and I thought I was losing my mind. They weren’t even valuable things.”

“To *me* they were,” Aunt hisses. “Of course they weren’t valuable to you. But to me...”
I picture my Aunt cleaning their home, leaving her fingerprints on every single belonging.

“You left that little girl alone outside, in the swing,” Aunt continued. “How valuable was she to you? You left her alone, unprotected. I had no choice but to take her with me. And I’ve provided for her all these years.” Aunt avoids my eyes, settling her gaze on my new sneakers. I am a coconspirator. I kick off the shoes, two toes poking out of a hole in my sock.

Officer Bowie drags Aunt away, and New Father steps into the room. He touches my shoulder, and I am suddenly attached to their family. I watch Aunt through her favorite kitchen window and realize I am the undoing of her collection, the one borrow always meant to be returned.