

Introduction

I STILL CAN'T TELL MY STORY up close, like it was me in it, breathing the tangled wisteria on the fence posts of Burl, Texas. There are times I still can't bear to say it was me. The book of my life continues to open, painful word by painful word, page after page. I get real close to typing the whole story with the word *I* in it, but I hit delete every time, replacing *me* with *she*.

Zady tells me I'm ready to write my story honest, but I'm not so sure. She says she's there to help me remember my healing, even as she puts an arm around my shoulder when a tear slips through. "It hurts," she says. "Real bad. Lord, I wish it didn't rip at you so."

She tells me I survived that story—that I should be proud—yet her presence brings back its horrid validity written on the backdrop of her tender love. Reminds me in a kind, wild way that this is *my* story even if I can't seem to admit it on the page.



*Summer 1983
Burl, Texas*

Uncle Zane appeared disheveled when Maranatha pestered him. His silvery hair, normally combed and parted in the exact same place, was instead bunched and unkempt, his part like a winding Burl road.

"Camilla and me, well, we want to go to the fair. Can you drive us? Please?" Maranatha practically danced, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"No," he shouted, an odd outburst for such a quiet man.

Gangly and with a sinewy will of her own, she pled, "C'mon, Uncle Zane. Everyone will be there. Besides, Camilla promised we'd shoot the fair — ride every single ride from the merry-go-round to the Zipper. This year I promised her I'd do it without getting sick."

"I said no."

Three plain words. Maranatha almost turned away in a thirteen-year-old huff, but she lingered long enough to see him sit down in a parlor chair, then bend forward, pressing palms to temple.

"We'll ride our bikes," she told him. The room echoed her words. "I'll be back later." Her words stung even as she said them, particularly because Uncle Zane, usually a man without reaction, looked up at her with a strange sort of look in his blue eyes. A look that pleaded, *Please stay.*

She left him there. And didn't look back.



Camilla and Maranatha raced down the road toward the embrace of the fair, miles away. "You're going to barf on me, I know it," Camilla teased.

"I will not. My stomach's better."

"Oh, right. Now that you're a teenager, you're not nauseous? If I were you, I'd be cautious. I don't trust your stomach. Neither should you."

They raced, tire to tire, until Camilla saw a wrought-iron gate and, behind it, a burnt skeleton of a house. "I smell mystery," she

said. She stopped her bike. Maranatha nearly crashed into her.

In lieu of a ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl, and despite Uncle Zane's pained blue eyes, Maranatha and Camilla climbed over the gate. They searched the scorched scene, pretending to be arson investigators. They concluded a cat had set fire to the house, taking feline revenge on an evil master. "All scary houses have names. This one's Black, sure as night," Camilla said.

As the day's shadows lengthened, after they'd explored the woods behind the house whose once-grand pillars stood charred against the Texas sky, Camilla said, "I want to come back here another day." She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head back. "Let's go back to Black." She wailed and screamed the words like AC/DC. Maranatha laughed so hard, she nearly wet her pants.



Maranatha and Camilla never made it to the fair.

Tired from their investigating, they pedaled lazily back to town. "I'll see you soon, baboon." Camilla waved a good-bye to Maranatha.

Something niggled at Maranatha as she walked the stairs of the big white house. Everything looked the same, but nothing felt that way.

"I'm home, Uncle Zane." Her voice echoed, bouncing off tall ceilings. She called Zady's name, though she knew it was unlikely the housekeeper would be there on a weekend. She shivered. Loneliness pierced her.

She walked past the parlor to look out the kitchen window at Uncle Zane's parking spot, figuring he'd probably left to look for her—again. He had swung on a wild pendulum from disinterest to overprotection the day her name changed from Mara

to Maranatha three years ago, but his protection kicked into high gear when she turned thirteen. On her birthday, he gave her a bike that sported a crudely shaped bow. He handed her a hockey helmet. “Be careful,” he said. And he meant it.

She stopped in front of the window. Uncle Zane’s white Cadillac sat silent in the driveway, the same place it’d been when she’d ridden away earlier.

Panic ripped through her.

Maranatha ran to the parlor. On the floor, Uncle Zane lay prostrate, face kissing the oriental rug, arms and legs outstretched like he was making a prone snow angel.

“Wake up,” she wailed.

But he didn’t.

An ambulance came and whisked him away, while the word *stroke* hung in the hot Burl evening.



Zady’d tried to soothe Maranatha during his long rehabilitation. “It’s not your fault, Natha,” she said. “I should’ve checked on him. He seemed altered, and I should’ve known.”

Though Zady wore guilt in the lengthening lines around her eyes, she pestered Maranatha with all sorts of don’t-blame-yourself words, meaningless blather that never made it past Maranatha’s terrible heart. The best way Maranatha could explain it to Camilla was that she and Zady stood before a giant chalkboard, with the words *should have* and *could have* scrawled over and over again like naughty kids’ sentences. While Zady tried to erase Maranatha’s *coulds* and *shoulds*, Maranatha rewrote them line by line.

One

*Summer 1987
Burl, Texas*

EVERY YEAR ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF his stroke, and many times in between, Maranatha retraced the route she and Camilla had ridden that day. In front of her bike tire beckoned a serpentine of gray pavement radiating heat. The more her shirt clung to her body in a sticky embrace, the better she liked it.

Penance.

She'd learned the word from Bishop Renny. He said something about trying to make things right by abusing yourself. Said Jesus took the need for all that away. But she knew Jesus would say something different to her, considering how she'd nearly killed Uncle Zane because of her selfishness.

The hot Burl breeze tangled Maranatha's hair so that it whipped and wrangled about her face. She didn't mind, didn't even brush a casual hand to her face to clear the hair from her eyes. At seventeen, she welcomed the wildness, wearing her tangles like a needed mask. A gust of sideways wind whipped the mask from her face.

Maranatha passed the costume shop where, behind a

cracked front window, one headless mannequin sported a faded Santa suit and another, a sequined Twenties dress. She pedaled past the farm implement shop whose yard was dotted with ancient rusty plows. This strip of road held most of Burl's broken dreams — a turn-of-the-century white farmhouse, now converted into a bed and breakfast that no one visited, a hand-painted For Sale sign declaring the dream dead. A mobile home stood way back on a fine piece of property, the structure tilted oddly to the left where the cement blocks had deteriorated. A goat preened on its roof, claiming it for himself. Four years ago, children had played out front. She and Camilla had even waved to them. So carefree for such a day.

Wiping the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, she glanced down at the too-small bike, despising it, as if it had once held her hostage, carrying her away from Uncle Zane's need four years ago when she and Camilla had been drawn toward the lure of cotton candy and caramel apples.

Maranatha veered onto the familiar gravel driveway flanked by crepe myrtles. She stopped, straddling her bike, catching her breath. She listened for cars but heard only the labored noise of a tractor, far away, until the engine sputtered and died.

The silence roared at her.

It should have blessed her with peace; instead, she remembered Uncle Zane's hair askew and wondered why God let a self-ish girl like her take up space in this world.

She looked behind her. Her thoughts shifted as a deeper worry played at her, taunting her. Though she never voiced it, she lived with a constant fear that someone would burst from the silence and grab her. She hated that she always looked behind, like she was expecting some crouching phantom to nab her. She'd been running from monsters bent on destroying her ever since General first drawled, "Hey, Beautiful" in her ear.

Even though she was sheltered in Uncle Zane's white house and safety was no longer elusive, she always felt the presence of evil five steps behind her. Ready to suffocate her.

She glanced at her wrist to soothe her fears. Circling it was her name, MARANATHA, each sterling letter separated by a bead. Zady'd given it to her a year after she found out that her real name wasn't Mara but Maranatha. Part of her quest in discovering her identity was a need for a name that meant more than "bitter." When she learned that her real name meant "Come, Lord Jesus," a part of her heart enlivened, as if it knew she was named that all along. She touched each letter, thanking God that He added Natha to the end of her name, that He changed her from bitter to a heart where Jesus could live. If He wanted to, that is.

She got off her bike. The same wrought-iron gate stood erect before her, chalkboard black and foreboding, with an out-of-place silhouette of a squirrel at its arched top. It always reminded her of Willy Wonka's gate, the gate that prohibited children from seeing the mysteries within the glorious Chocolate Factory. She laid her bike in its familiar dusty place behind the crepe myrtles and approached the gate. Locked.

As usual.

Heart thumping, she tried the handle, a ritual she performed every time she ventured to this place, the scene of her selfishness. Why she thought it would magically open today, she didn't know. When she tugged at it, the gate creaked a warning, but it didn't budge. Looking back toward the road, she listened again. Nothing. Only the sound of a dove calling to its lover and the crackle of too-dry grass rubbing against itself like a fiddle against its bow. She breathed in the hot air and touched the angry wrought iron. She returned to the bike, unzipped the pouch behind her seat, and stretched on her bike gloves.

Attacking the gate again, she pulled herself up, up, up until she could swing her leg over the gate's pointed top. She scampered down, preferring to jump the last three feet.

Maranatha smiled. Before her was an open field whose hair was littered with dandelions past their prime. Bits of dandelion white floated in front of her like an idle snowfall, only these flurries drifted toward the sun, away from the ground, in lazy worship. Beyond the field stood the remains of the charred mansion.

Now shaded by the house's pillars, she remembered Uncle Zane's eyes the day of his stroke. The smile left her face.

She ran to the middle of the field, trying to shake the memory—her laughing, laughing, laughing while Uncle Zane pled for her. She stopped. Maranatha picked one dandelion, held it to her mouth, and blew a warm breeze over its head, scattering wishes toward the has-been mansion. *Jesus, You know my name. I want to live up to it. I want my heart to be a place where You want to come. But I'm afraid it's too dark there. What I've done. What's been done to me. . . . I'm sorry I'm so needy, but I have to know, have to know it in my gut. Please show me You love me anyway. Whatever it takes.*

It had been her wish since she met Jesus under the pecan tree at her home, back in the days when Uncle Zane had a quiet will and Zady, his housekeeper and her friend, kept house without the intrusions of Georgeanne, who had invaded their peaceful home with her schemes. Zady dished out helpings and helpings of His love every day at Uncle Zane's table, but Maranatha never seemed to be able to digest even a scrap. She experienced Jesus at church, surrounded by Mama Frankie and faces darker than her own. When dark-skinned Denim spoke or his pale-faced stepdaughter Camilla rhymed truth, Maranatha thanked God for making unique folks, for giving her friends. Still, Jesus' love

seemed far away, and she, undeserving.

A portion of her little girl's heart had been abducted by General, the boy-turned-man who violated her so many years ago. His pocked face visited her in nightmares where she had no voice, no safety, no escape. He seemed to lurk behind every stray noise. He didn't haunt Burl anymore, but he lived firmly in her mind, igniting dread. She feared he'd stolen the only part of her that could have understood God's love. She feared he held the middle piece to the puzzle of her life.

Am I wishing for something I'll never have?

Maranatha shielded her eyes from the pursuing sun and walked toward the burnt house. Four once-white pillars stood tall, blackened by angry flames. She remembered when she'd first seen Uncle Zane's home nearly a decade ago, how it loomed large on its street, how she'd longed to be the owner there someday. But reality was more complicated than that. Sure, she lived there now. Little by little, she was renovating it to splendor, but lately the joy of transforming it had waned thin, like a pilled swimsuit at summer's end. Fixing things was hard. She'd painted and painted until her fingernails were permanently speckled. Then the pier and beam foundation settled further, cracking her handiwork.

As she gazed upward at the four pillars that reached for the sky, where the abandoned house's roof once lived, she wondered if she'd ever have a home of her own, children about her legs, a husband to love her. The thought of marriage both repulsed her and pulsed through her. Hatred and longing—all in one girl.

She walked through the rubbish, darkening her red-dirted shoes, looking for a sign from heaven. She played this game sometimes, asking God for signs, for sacred objects that showed her that He saw her, that He knew she existed. That He cared.

Something glinted off and on as the sun played hide-and-

seek through the trees. She bent low to the ashes, her body blocking the sun. The glinting stopped, so she stood and let the sun have its way again. There, spotlighted beneath the gaze of the pillars, was a simple, thick-banded gold ring. She retrieved it, dusted the ashes from the gold, and examined it, turning it over and over in her hand.

Inside the ring was a faint engraving. *Forever my love.*

“Thank You,” she whispered, but her words melted in a hot wind. Dark clouds obscured the sun. The sky purpled. She’d seen a sky like that before. She slipped the ring into her shirt pocket and ran toward her bike, climbed the hot gate like a criminal pursued, and dropped on the other side.

She mounted her bike. From behind she heard a hustled scurrying, like the furious bending of too-dry alfalfa.

Then darkness.

Someone’s hands suffocated her eyes, obscuring the day, stealing her screaming breath. She kicked her leg over the ten-speed, struggling to free herself from the firm grip, and tried to holler. Like in her nightmares, she was mute from terror. Though she knew General’s presence was illogical—he’d been shipped off to some sort of juvenile-offender boot camp—she could almost smell his breath as she gasped for her own. She heard a laugh but couldn’t place it. It sounded familiar, like family.

She kicked and elbowed like a kindergarten boy proving his manhood against a playground bully, but the hands stayed enlaced around her eyes.

More laughter. Even more familiar.

She took a deep breath and screamed. Real loud.

Thunder answered back.

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