

8-00 recent story with original draft final

It's Okay to Cry

✓ Allowing for thirty minutes of unfelt hugs at the graveside of the grandmother who raised them and Bethann will be on her way from South Georgia to South Florida with Holly--nineteen, but an adolescent mess--and already she wants to turn around and take back her offer to re-raise her sister.

Passing before the casket at the flower-banked altar of the little rural church, Bethann slips her left arm around Holly and she presses all two-hundred-plus pounds of flesh into Bethann and moans. Bethann feels her own face flush, a raw surge of sorrow in her chest, tears misting her brown eyes. But Holly's broad face remains pale and plastic, her slit gold eyes dry. Bethann walks her sister toward the open door and the assorted friends and kin bunched there, relaxes her hold on Holly's waist, but still she hovers hot and close. Her hair is sheet white--she was a cute fat kid but now she is ugly, greedy, mean.

Bethann has had just enough college psychology to dabble with the theory that Holly can't help how she is, what she is, that their mother having hung herself in jail and their daddy having died an alcoholic are at least partly to blame for her behavior, that Holly's problem--make that plural--is a reflection of all that and

reversible. Allowances must be made. But deep down, Bethann knows the sweet old lady with the stern deathface has made allowances--the last person in the world who would tolerate the stealing and lying and using. The last person who loved Holly. Except for Bethann.

"Let's go," Bethann says and starts walking toward her Jeep Wrangler in the sideyard of the white concrete-block church. She doesn't look behind and half-hopes that Holly isn't following, but a sidelong look at the dry grass lawn reveals Holly's bulk in shadow. Same stalking shadow from as far back as Bethann can remember, up until she left home two years ago for college in Miami, Florida.

The late sun is beaming down, glancing off the parked cars and steaming her body beneath the navy blazer. She can smell the sunned cloth mingled with the cut grass and scorch of autumn. She shrugs the blazer down over her shoulders and shucks one sleeve and then the other from her long thin arms. Then slings it over her right shoulder, still walking. Hearing behind her Holly's pointy-toed girly shoes skimming the grass. Won't pick up her feet. Symptom one, of many, of her general slouchiness. Or maybe her fear of leaving the only place, the only people, she's ever known. Bethann would like to look back, to see if those people are watching her go. Watching ~~them~~ both go. But she doesn't.

When she gets to the red Wrangler, she opens the door with the remote; she never can remember to test the luxury from a distance. She gets in and tosses her blazer to the rear seat. Holly stands at the other window. Her rattlesnake eyes fixed on Bethann through the hot glass.

"It's open," Bethann says, arranging her tone, her face, her feelings. She starts the truck and the air conditioner rips into the packed heat and baking ~~air~~ *air*

Holly opens the door and has to hike ^{up} ~~up~~ *the hem* her green straight skirt to step up. She laughs through her closed face and hoists herself up and onto the seat. The big green jacket and dress Bethann bought her to wear to the funeral looks wilted and sprung. Her curled hair is a rats' nest.

Bethann takes the hand-drawn map from her pants pocket, unfolds it and stares down at the web of roads that will take her to the interstate. If she's lucky. She passes it to Holly. "You direct me," she says. Holly takes the paper in her left hand--not right, mind you--and fans her face. Her squiggly curls separate and wave. Bethann has never thought about it before, but wonders whether Holly, who quit school pregnant at fifteen, can even read. And suddenly the whole project of re-raising Holly seems too much and too late. Impossible and futile. Where to start? Can she even afford to feed Holly on her puny salary from Electrolux? She tries to picture Holly working as she had when she first went to Florida: peddling vacuum cleaners door to door--without a car to haul the heavy, awkward demonstrator and kit. She tries to picture Holly working for Bell South, or AT&T, but her sister keeps popping up in a brown waitress uniform. McDonald's or Shoney's. Holly, who won't even wash her own plate, as a waitress!

"Ought to be crossing the Florida line by six," says Bethann.

"You got a pool?" Holly fans. One fat ankle crossed over a fat knee. Skirt up to her crotch. Dingy white panties. Shoes sideslung on the floor.

"No pool," says Bethann. Holly can't help it.

"Cable?"

"No cable."

"What you do for fun?" That same laugh behind the board face.

"Study for next day's test."

"God!" Holly stares out the window at the pinewoods, at a sudden field of cut hay with mammoth bolts lined along a fenceline. The sky is leached, losing its blue hue.

"You won't be bored," says Bethann. "You'll be too busy to get bored."

"What I'm scared of," says Holly--muffled laugh. Her speech is spit-thick, and Bethann can tell she is dipping Skoal. She hands her a foam cup from the holder on the center console.

"Here," she says.

Holly spits. Brownish saliva like ropy coffee.

"All of it," says Bethann.

Holly laughs. "You kidding."

"No I'm not."

"Mama's been letting me dip, long as I don't smoke." She spits the damp wad of tobacco with a plunk into the cup, perfuming the truck with a chicory scent, then buzzes down the window and lets the wind have it. Brown spittle flies, freckling the rear window on that side.

"Let's get this straight," says Bethann. "I can hardly afford to feed myself and stay in school, so I won't be spending money on cigarettes or Skoal." Or drugs, she thinks but doesn't say.

"Maybe I oughta stayed with Dad." Holly looks back as if to see her grandfather.

Bethann steers the truck south at the next fork in the road, shifts gears. "Seems like I recall him telling you he was through."

"Hell, Bethann! Heywood's always saying stuff like that. I wrecked his old Caprice and he like to had a heart attack. Next week, he hauled off and handed me ^{his} truck keys."

Bethann drives. Trying to sum up and categorize Holly's condition. What makes Holly Holly. If only Bethann can label her, she can handle her. For instance, Holly behaves like a spoiled teenager--but she's almost adult-age and has hardly been spoiled; Holly hangs with dopeheads because nobody decent will have anything to do with her--but decent people hung with her before she became one of the dopeheads; Holly is the product of backwoods education and hick thinking--but that's not it altogether either. Soon Bethann is back to the excuse--reason--of Holly being an orphan, raised by two strict old people set in their ways. But Bethann herself has been raised by the same people, in the same place, under the same circumstances. And it scares the hell out of her to think that according to psychology she may yet turn out like Holly.

Another dirt road past neat farmplaces, then woods, and soon they are passing a Hardee's, an Amoco, following the blue arrow I-75 signs west with the twilight.

"You ain't hungry?" Holly holds to her fat shaved calf and jacks her foot higher up on her thigh--a fat acrobat ^{OH}.

"Not yet." Bethann stares ahead as if she hasn't seen the Hardee's.

A sharp left and they are on the entrance ramp to the interstate. No backing up now. She merges with on-coming traffic. The Jeep wobbles as a semi roars past on their left.

Holly gives the driver the finger and snorts.

A long silver car with a gray-haired couple glides alongside. Holly gives them the finger and snorts.

"Try waving instead," says Bethann.

"You wave your ownself," says Holly.

"I'm not about to argue with you."

"Yeah, you will. Just like Mama and Heywood."

"Was that before or after you wrote 15,000 dollars worth of bad checks on them?"

"That again!" Holly places both feet on the floor and the chuckle rises from behind her face. "I'll just get out up here if that's how it's gone be."

"I'm sorry, Holly. Truly, I am."

"Truly, I am. You ought hear yourself since you went to college."

To make up for lugging along Holly's past, Bethann pulls off at about the fifth exit since they got on the interstate. Making certain enough time has lapsed since Holly threatened to get out. She motors up to the STOP sign, then left to a Chic Filet.

"They ain't open on Sundays," Holly says.

"Oh, I forgot."

Holly chuckles as if to say, See how smart I am. Then, "Right yonder's a Kentucky Fried." She points farther west up the highway where the sun is melting down behind a billboard with three faded

young women bare to the printline over their breasts: WE BARE ALL. Which Holly makes a big show of reading. The fact that she can read does not, under the circumstances, hearten Bethann.

Inside the brilliant yellow and white restaurant with its plastic aura, Holly orders the chicken dinner, extra crispy, with a side of corn on the cob. Same yellow as the walls and Holly's hair under the white lights. The green suit changes her skin to green. Like a lizard, she picks up the color of her surroundings. Same as she picks up the behavior of her friends. She's like a mirror reflecting what passes before her.

She eats fast and much, stirring the silky brown gravy in the well of her mashed potatoes while informing Bethann on the history of "the Colonel." She makes him sound like a great statesman. She scoots barefoot from the booth and skates to the counter for a refill of Coke. As she sidles into the booth again, the lapels of her green jacket fall open and Bethann can see the circle imprint of a Skoal can in her bra.

"Better take that cup with you," she says and gets up and dumps her snack box in the garbage can. Then heads for the restroom.

When she gets back, Holly isn't in the booth, and suddenly Bethann panics. The blanching lights overhead make her feel so disoriented she cannot sort the door on the left from the wall of windows. That kind of feeling. Then she sees the huge green suit through the plate glass: Holly just standing there, sipping Coke through a straw without letup.

It is almost dark and the strip mall lights outshine the bruised afterlight of sundown. Still that smelter of asphalt and exhaust fumes. Bethann gets into the truck and feels lesson one is starting over when Holly stands there waiting for her to unlock the unlocked door.

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Just past the Florida line, the rain of lovebugs changes into real rain, but still the milky bursts of bugs stick to the windshield like paste. The rain stops and starts, and Bethann, switching the wipers from intermittent to slow, finally turns them off but keeps her right hand on the lever to tap it into action as the rain accumulates on the windshield. The sky ahead is racked with navy clouds; overhead it is boggy-mud gray but moving. Ten miles farther and the rain becomes steady and the headlights in the northbound lanes bounce and glister on the wet gravel and Holly slurps at the watered Coke on bottom of her cup. The wipers slap and grind, and the confusion of sounds makes Bethann think that Holly is crying. But when she looks over, Holly's face is sealed neon green in the dash lights. Her pouty lips wrapped around the straw, cup with picture of the Colonel in both hands.

"I thought you were crying," Bethann says.

Holly lets go of the straw, says, "How come?"

"Just sounded like it."

"I mean, how come would I be crying?"

"I guess because our mother just died."

"Grandmother. Besides, you know I don't cry."

"You could," says Bethann. "I mean, it's okay to cry. Sometimes I wish you would cry."

"How come?" She buzzes the window down and pitches the cup out into the rain, letting in the bitter smell of ~~rain~~ ^{steamed gravel} and dampened dust.

The cup tumbles to the emergency exit and rolls to the ditch where ~~above are~~ ^{above are} marching billboards with undershot lights, ~~advertisements~~ ^{advertisements} like Jesus in white ^{Car!} ~~and Mickey Mouse~~ ^{Disney.}

"You got any crackers or gum?" Holly opens the glove compartment.

"I'll help you lose weight if you want to." Lack of self-esteem is a term so overused and misused it's been used up, but it applies here. It has to be Bethann's weight."

"Yeah. Like I ain't tried."

"All you have to do is eat healthy and slow."

No answer. She lifts the map and the auto manual and pulls out a red Bic lighter. "You smoke?"

"No."

"Pot. I bet you do pot. All them college kids smoke pot."

"I don't."

"But you got your faults and don't say you ain't, how come you wearing them men's shoes."

Bethann can feel her small feminine feet lost inside the hard lace-up shoes. "Now that you've brought it up, I'd appreciate it if you'd quit telling my friends I'm a lesbian."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes you did. Amy told me she called and you said, 'I bet you didn't know Bethann's a lesbian.' For the record, I am not a lesbian, but if I was, it wouldn't be anybody's business."

"Just my point." That insane laugh behind the face, a smug look.

"Well, you make your life other people's business by using them. Bringing your dope buddies home and propping them up in front of Mama and Daddy's big-screen TV. Playing it all night and wrecking the house. Stealing Mama's jewelry and her dying of cancer."

"Now you blaming me for Mama dying." She scoots low, knees on the dash. Arms crossed over her great juttred breasts.

Bethann swings the Jeep out and around a U-Haul truck, motors ahead. Sucks in her breath and lowers her voice. "It's not your fault; it's nobody's fault. Let's drop it."

"Quit bossing me then."

"I'm not, I'm trying to talk to you."

"Then shut up." Holly gazes at her warped face in the rain-streamed window glass.

The rain has stopped and Bethann switches off the wipers, and the truck is quiet as she passes the car ahead. Out of the slant of her eye, she sees Holly straighten up and poke something into her jacket pocket.

"All you had to do was ask. I would have given you the lighter."

And then in a shower of light at an exit, she spies the red Bic on top of the map and manual. What has Holly taken? What was in the glovebox? Nothing of value. Nothing important. But it's the principle...

The rain starts again, silver slashes in the semi-dark. Bethann has to lean forward and strain to see ahead. Light traffic and oily pools that spatter like glass with each auto tire to hit them, then mends like magic. Checkbook. A spare checkbook was in the glovebox. She cuts her eyes at Holly, now doping her bottom lip with Skoal. When she looks at the highway again she is staring underneath the back bumper of a semi, so close that she can see the greasy axles, the cave of shafts and crossframing. She brakes, the Jeep shimmies into the left lane and curves toward the median, then halts facing north and straddled a ditch of black water between slopes of weeds and grass. A backlog of cursing and rattling and thunking joins in the middle to meet Holly's overheated voice. "You trying to get us killed?"

Bethann just sits with both arms on the steering wheel, headlights glaring on the black water and wet grass and the southbound traffic slowing to look. Rain tapping on the truck roof, persistent and oddly peaceful.

"You don't care about anybody," Bethann shouts, not looking because she can't bear to. "You didn't care about Mama and you don't care about me." Then she looks, really looks. "You don't even care about you. I don't know if you can care. So tell me, how the hell can I drive with you robbing me and smarting off?"

"I'm out of here." Holly opens the door and gets out in the rain and picks up her girly new pointy-toed shoes, slams the door and starts walking up the median, Georgia bound. The truck smells hot, like burning rubber.

Bethann watches through the wavering of tears and rain. Watches till the broad green outfit and sheet white hair are out of sight. And she is momentarily glad to no longer see her, hear her. She starts to turn the Jeep onto the interstate, headed in the other direction, but has to wait for a gap in traffic. Meantime, she wheels the Jeep back into the exact middle of the median, astraddle the water again, and starts juddering along. Soon, she sees Holly walking ahead--head down and bare white feet high-stepping with purpose. Then as if for Bethann's benefit, Holly steps to the edge of the interstate and sticks out her right thumb. Moving her lips to say "fuck you"--which Bethann has forbidden--when the cars slow but pass her by.

Bethann pulls alongside, buzzes the window down, and yells through the rain and the slisking of car tires, the trucks' roaring, "Holly, come on. Get in here."

Holly keeps standing there, alone, pitiable, wet. Thumb out.

Bethann gets out of the truck. "Come on, get in the truck. Right now, get in the truck." Her voice coming hoarse and thick and lost in the burn of diesel and oil and asphalt.

One glance back from Holly and she steps out into the middle of the glistening highway and stands and even begins to hop from right to left foot, side to side and back, then both feet spread like some kind of ritual dance, cars slowing and swerving, and Bethann standing on the edge of the emergency lane, yelling, yelling, but Holly only repeats the steps, like hopscotch, yes hopscotch. And then in the lights of the final semi, Bethann sees the tears shine in those rattlesnake eyes.