

Brown

Charmayne Gubler Warnock

I'M MOSTLY BROWN. I have brown hair and, in summer, brown skin. It's not a pretty golden brown like the models in the tanning lotion ads. It's a kind of ashy, dirty brown. My eyes are brown like my dad's. I live in a square brown house with a brown yard because we live in the Nevada desert and my grandma isn't going to waste water on something as useless as grass.

I have a brown life.

The alfalfa fields that stretch out from town are green because they get water. Brigham Young planned it that way. He said the people should live together in towns with square blocks and have their fields outside town. I guess that was a good idea. That way we have neighbors—and maybe friends.

I have a sometimes-friend named Lisa. Sometimes she likes me and sometimes she likes Rose better. On the days she likes Rose better, she doesn't play with me. I see her and Rose pushing each other in the tire swing in Rose's backyard next door. They don't look at me. They eat popsicles and whisper a lot. Rose almost never likes me. We were playing basketball once, and she told me I was a lousy player. I'm not. So I pushed her up against the wall and a nail poked her in the back.

Lisa's hair is dishwater blonde. She tells people she is dishwater blond like it's a good thing. Actually her hair is even uglier than mine. When Lisa and I play together, we pretend to be other people whose lives are in color. Mostly I pretend to be Nancy Drew, girl sleuth. Sometimes I pretend to be Shayla Shazam, Las Vegas stripper.

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When I grow up I'll probably be both—detective by day, stripper by night.

I haven't told my grandma that I'm going to be a stripper.

My mother was a nightclub dancer who disappeared two years after I was born, so I live with my dad and my grandma in that brown house I told you about. My grandma doesn't like my mother and doesn't talk about her. My dad, on the other hand, loves my mother. Sometimes in the evenings when he comes in from irrigating the alfalfa fields or milking the cow, he sits in the big chair and I sit on his lap. He tells me how, when my mother danced or thought something was funny, her eyes sparkled like crushed blue glass. And she was graceful, like a bird landing on a snow-covered branch. He keeps a black-and-white photo of her in his wallet. I look at it, trying to remember her face, but I can't. In the photo, her eyes are gray. Maybe if it were in color, I would remember.

My best friends are a border collie named Zippy and a mean sorrel mare named Ginger. We roam the hills together. Zippy chases jack rabbits. Ginger balks at empty beer cans gleaming in the sagebrush. I don't know why she does that. Not a single can has jumped out and bit her. At first I believed she did it because she thinks it's a game. Now I think she does it because she resents me holding the reins. She resents authority. That's what Mrs. Lewis told my father about me at parent-teacher conference. She puckered up her mouth into a brown, withered-apple-looking thing and said, "Shayla resents authority."

I thought I knew what those words meant but I looked them up in the dictionary just to make sure. She's right. I don't like her telling me what to do.

My dad smiled when Mrs. Lewis told him that. When we got home, he scratched my head and called me "Skeeter the Rebel." Sometimes he calls me Skeeter.

I don't mean to be a rebel. It just works out that way. Sometimes I look up and see everyone walking in one direction and I'm walking in the other.

Like in our spring play last year. Mrs. Lewis wrote this play and the third-grade class put it on for the parents. All the girls were supposed to be flowers, except for Rose, who is the teacher's pet. She got to be the only human in the play, which is dumb because her *name* is Rose. She wore a ruffled dress with a pinafore and pretended to water us with a giant water-

ing can. The boys were evil bugs with black wings. I wanted to be a bug, but I had to be a purple iris.

All the moms got together to make flower costumes for their daughters. The teacher sent a note to my grandma saying they were going to make costumes at Mrs. Hoops's house on Monday morning, but Grandma didn't go. She told me I could make my own costume. So I did.

In the attic is a box of costumes that belonged to my mother. Grandma doesn't know they're there because she never goes in the attic. I found the costumes one day when I had to hide because Grandma was really mad. She was looking to skin me alive because I'd let the cat in the house and it pooped on her bedspread.

The attic is full of hot shadows and gray curly stuff between the rafters called insulation. You have to walk on the rafters because if you step on the gray curly stuff, you'll fall into hell. It's not the Mormon hell. It's like the other hell that I saw in a book. It's a more interesting hell. There are these naked people screaming and being boiled alive in hot lava and gushing blood from being poked with pitchforks by devils. I think the Mormon hell is boring and that's why you don't want to go there. Satan and his spirits, who will never have bodies, live there and they can't do anything but be mad. At church they don't talk much about hell because it is a boring place. Mostly they talk about the Mormon heaven, which is like a big family reunion in the Garden of Eden.

Anyway, the day I hid in the attic from my grandma, I was walking along the rafters, waving my arms like a tightrope walker. Where the attic roof sloped to the floor, I had to crouch down and crawl. There was a long cardboard box sitting in the corner. I sat down by the box to wait until it got quiet downstairs. When the pans stopped banging and the doors quit slamming, I figured Grandma had forgotten about me and moved onto something else. She's like that. At first she explodes like a firecracker and scares everyone. Then after a few minutes she's fine, like nothing ever happened. The trick is to be absent during the exploding time.

By the time the downstairs got quiet, my eyes were used to the dim light. I decided to look in this long cardboard box. When I lifted the lid, there was this ghostly smell of perfume. I had smelled that perfume before. It made me feel all warm and sad and happy at the same time. I picked up a long silky scarf out of the box and wrapped it around my neck. It was soft and smelled like spice and flowers. Suddenly I remembered being little, standing in a crib.

It is dark. I am holding onto the top rail, watching the crack of light under the door, waiting for the door to open. I can't climb out of the crib by myself because snakes live underneath the crib and they will bite me. I don't know how I know the snakes are there. I just know it. I lean over the top rail trying to see the snakes, but they are too smart and crawl back against the wall so I can't see them.

I wait a long time. Finally the door opens and someone with fluffy hair walks in. She lifts me up out of the bed and holds me against her. I feel safe. She is soft and warm and smells like spice and flowers. Then she is gone, and there is only the dark attic.

I buried my face in the box of costumes and breathed in hard. I thought that if I closed my eyes and breathed in all the perfume, it would be real. I could go back in time and my mother would hold me. I could watch her brush her hair and sit in her lap. I would be old enough to talk to her and she would like me so much she wouldn't leave.

Something in the costume box brushed my arm—like it wanted me to know it was there. So I pulled it out. It was a swimsuit kind of thing covered with black sequins. It had a swooping tail of long purple feathers. I took it over to the window and held it up in the light. It was perfect. I could put the purple feathers on my head and look just like a purple iris.

There were lots of other things in the box, but I took only the sequined suit and feathers and some black net tights with diamond-shaped holes in them. That night when everyone was asleep I put on my costume. The suit was a little baggy but the tights were stretchy and fit okay. I stuck the purple feathers in my hair with bobby pins then looked in the mirror. The feathers dangled down and swayed back and forth when I moved. I was a very cool iris.

The night of the play, I walked to school and carried my costume in a brown paper bag. Dad had an irrigation turn and said he'd be there as soon as he could. Grandma doesn't drive. Even if she did drive, she wouldn't go.

When I got to the school, everyone was all excited and running around. Some of the kids were peeking out through the curtains at their parents. I looked at the girls in their crepe-paper costumes and knew my costume was much better. Mine was made of real feathers. I went to the girl's bathroom and locked myself in a stall. First I put on the tights, then the sequin suit. Earlier I'd found lots of wide green ribbon in a drawer. I wrapped it around and around my body, on top of the sequins then let the ends dangle like leaves. Last of all, I put the purple feathers on my head.

People noticed me right off when I walked out of the bathroom. I could see them looking and being envious. Davy whistled and asked me what I was supposed to be.

"An iris," I told him, and stuck out my tongue.

He went to get his friends.

Lisa and Rose came over and stood by me, touching the feathers.

"You don't really look like a flower," said Rose.

Davy came back, walking like a drunk cowboy. "You look like a bird," said Davy. His friends started squawking and flapping their elbows because they are stupid.

Then Rose's mother saw me. She nudged Mrs. Lewis. But Mrs. Lewis ignored her because she was telling everyone what to do. When Mrs. Lewis saw everyone else looking at me, she turned around to look too. She stopped talking.

She walked over to me and said, "Where did you get this?"

I didn't want to tell her so I said nothing.

"I think we can fix something different," said Rose's mother, unrolling some strips of brown crepe paper. "If only . . ." She looked at me as if she felt sorry for me.

"I don't want something different," I said.

"You can't wear that in the play," said Mrs. Lewis. "It's not . . . suitable."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa and Rose and the boys. Rose was smirking.

It was then I knew my costume was all wrong. It was better than everyone else's, but it was wrong.

I stepped back because Rose's mom was coming toward me with her brown crepe paper and a pair of scissors. Then I turned around and ran down the stairs, down the hallway. I ducked into the bathroom and grabbed the paper bag with my clothes in it and ran out the door. I ran all the way home.

When I got to my house, I could see Grandma through the window, sitting in her brown swivel rocker watching TV. For a few minutes, I stood outside in the dark wearing my feathers. She couldn't see me. Then I went around to my bedroom and climbed in the window.

I was almost asleep when Dad came in my room.

"Where were you, Skeeter? I went to the play and I didn't see you."

He sat down on my bed.

I pretended to be asleep because I didn't want to tell him what had happened. But when he put his hand on my shoulder, I started to cry.

"What's the matter, Skeeter?"

I didn't say. I just threw myself into his arms and bawled. After awhile my nose got plugged and I couldn't breathe, so I stopped crying.

"I had the best costume," I said. "But Mrs. Lewis said I couldn't wear it."

"What do you mean?"

I got up and showed my dad the sequin suit and purple feathers. He took them from me and looked at them for a long time, brushing his fingers along the feathers then he said, "You must have found these in the attic."

I nodded. "They were my mother's, weren't they?"

He pressed his nose against the costume and was very still. Then he hugged me and gave a funny hiccup and hugged me tighter. "You can wear those costumes anytime you want. Your mother would like that. And if Grandma says anything, tell her to talk to me about it. Tell her I said it's okay."

He looked at me like he would make sure it was okay. He looked almost mad, as if he wouldn't let anyone hurt me, not Mrs. Lewis or Rose or the boys at school. Or he would get them.

It made me feel good that he didn't want anyone to hurt me. But I knew he couldn't do it. Mostly they hurt my feelings, and how do you stop that? If someone tries to punch you, you can punch them back. Or someone bigger can come and stand by you and they'll leave you alone. But usually people just say things.

And even though the play was a whole year ago, people still say things. Like when I left my sweater at school, Grandma threw a fit that I don't take care of stuff and said I can just run around naked for all she cares if I can't take care of the nice things people give me.

So I walk back to school to get my sweater. Some of the teachers are sitting in the classroom, talking. One of the teachers is saying, "Could you believe those fishnet stockings? But what can you expect when the mother is a hooker?"

Mrs. Lewis sees me standing at the door and looks at the other teacher real hard until she stops talking and starts looking at her fingernails. I take my sweater off the hook and don't even look at them—like they aren't even there.

It is then that I decide I will just have to find my mother and show them what is true. She is a dancer, not a hooker.

On TV people talk to the police about finding missing persons, so I decide to talk to Davy's uncle who is the part-time sheriff in our town. The rest of the time he is the janitor at the school. When I ask him if he knows where my mother is, he just pushes back his hat and tells me it's getting hot. Then he gives me a quarter and says to go get a popsicle.

While I'm sitting on the front step of our house eating my grape popsicle, I try to think about what kind of detective work Nancy Drew would do to find my mother. The door bangs open and Grandma comes out and says the chickens' nest boxes need cleaning and to go get some fresh straw.

When I show up with a bale of straw in my wagon, the chickens are all off chasing grasshoppers and fighting over them. They don't even care that I am making things clean and fresh for them. I think they should stand around and say what a nice job I'm doing.

I scoop out the mucky, smelly old straw with a pitchfork and throw it on the manure pile. It doesn't take long because most of it is caked together like a brown brick. Then I put nice yellow straw in the boxes. It looks like Easter. It looks as if the chickens could lay colored eggs if they thought about it hard.

When I get through, I rinse my hands off in the irrigation ditch and sit down in the tall wild grass that grows along the bank. The plum trees that line the ditch are full of hard green plums. Some of them have fallen to the ground and I start throwing the plums at the fence posts between our house and Rose's house. Finally Rose comes out of her house and hollers, "My mother says to quit throwing those plums on our property. She doesn't want any of those trashy trees growing over here."

"If you don't like our plums, why do you come over here and steal them?"

"I don't steal plums. I don't even like those sour old plums."

"Yeah, well, how would you know how they taste if you're not eating them?"

Rose just glares at me, thinking hard about what other mean thing she can say. Then she thinks of it. "Well, at least my mom takes care of me. She didn't go off and leave me so she could be a whore."

I stand up. "My mom is not a whore," I shout. "She just had to leave."

It is then that I see my grandma. She rises up from behind the raspberry bushes where she has been picking berries. She looks tall. My grandma's not that tall, but she looks tall. She looks hard at Rose then says, "You'd better go home, little girl."

The corners of Rose's mouth drop down and she backs away and runs to her house.

My legs fold under me and I sit down in the grass. Hard. I don't cry. Grandma walks over with her bucket of raspberries and sits down beside me, her legs sticking out in front of her. She pulls her skirt down over her knees and picks a burr from her wrinkled sock. "Your mother wasn't like that," she says. "Some people just don't have anything better to do with their time than say a lot of useless things that their brain doesn't attend to."

"It's not true—what Rose said?"

"It's not true." She frowns at Rose's house. "And just don't you pay any attention to them. What I've learned is that people who don't feel so good about themselves say things to make other people feel bad. People who feel comfortable inside their own skin don't have the need to hurt other folks."

I think about this for a while. I think about mean people not feeling good in their own skin and wonder if that's why Grandma doesn't like to go to church. Sometimes people say mean things at church. Me and my dad go to church anyway, and sometimes just me when he has to irrigate.

I look at her rough, old-lady white legs and wonder if she will kill me if I ask the thing I've wanted to ask ever since I can remember. "Why did my mother leave?"

Grandma puts her hands in her lap and looks out across the raspberry bushes and the fences. Finally she says, "She was from the city. This place didn't suit her. She said she got tired of the desert and all the brown. It was just all brown."

"She said that? That it was all brown?"

Grandma nods. "She was used to trees and lots of green things. Your dad tried to make things nice for her here. He planted grass out front of the house and made a big flowerbed with all kinds of flowers. Things were fine for a while. Then she got it in her head that she was going to go to Hollywood and be a movie star. Some man in a shiny car stopped at Carter's Market for gas one day and told her she looked just like a movie star. After that she couldn't stop talking about going to Hollywood. She

said if only they could see her dance—that was all it'd take. But your dad couldn't move. He's a farmer. What would he do in Hollywood?" She looks at me.

I try to imagine my dad in Hollywood, driving a slick car instead of a truck. He wouldn't fit in.

"They had a big fight." Grandma sighs and straightens her wrinkled sock. "Your dad took off mad. She packed up her things and started out the door. She had you with her." Grandma stops and waits a long time before going on. My heart is clicking in my chest like crazy and I want to cry, but Grandma doesn't like crying.

Finally she says, "It wasn't that she didn't want you. I made her leave you here. I said she wasn't fit to be a mother—draggin' a little girl around in bars and nightclubs. I said she'd already ruined too many lives. She didn't need to ruin yours."

I pull my knees up to my chest and lay my forehead on them. My eyes sting and I almost can't breathe.

"Why didn't she come back?" I mumble into the dark space between my knees.

"After she'd been gone a few months, we got a letter from some hospital in California. It was a bill."

"She died?"

"No. She didn't die." Grandma looks up at the plum trees and thinks for a long time. "She had something about her that was different from most people. Some days she'd be singing and waltzing around the house. She'd look out the window and say she wanted to run out and hug all that big blue desert sky. Others times she wouldn't get out of bed for days on end. I'd hear her crying." Grandma looks at me. "That's why she was in the hospital. She got real sad out there in California when she found out they didn't want her. She tried to do away with herself. When your dad found out where she was, he drove to California to get her, but by the time he got to the hospital, she'd already left. He looked all over but never found her."

Grandma reaches over and puts her arm around me all stiff-like.

"Do you think she'll come back home?"

"I don't think so."

I think of my dad driving around California and how he must have talked to police departments and looked in phone books. "What happened to the grass and flowers my dad planted?"

"They didn't get watered."

I look at the dry patch of ground by the house. The irrigation ditch isn't that far away. "I would remember to water them," I say. "I would like some grass and flowers."

My grandma looks at me. "You'd have to carry the water in a bucket."

"I can do that."

"Well." She sighs deep like she is buried under heavy rocks. "Maybe we can do that. I have some seeds."

By late summer there is a scattering of yellow marigolds in the flowerbed in front of the house and different colors of cosmos and snapdragons. There are even some columbines that my dad brought home from the hills and planted in the ground. They will bloom next spring. And next to the flowerbed is a patch of weedy grass. Grandma complains about the weeds, but Dad says the grass will choke out the weeds. For now, I think the weeds are just fine. They are green.