

What Little Girls Are Made Of

Molly always said, “Mine is the only mother in the world who was excited when her daughter got knocked up at sixteen.” Then she would snort in laughter and add, gesturing at her husband, Luke, “Because that meant I had him to look after me from then on and she didn’t have to worry about me anymore.” She’d be grinning as she said it, but the look that nobody managed to catch in her deep brown eyes said, *Not that she ever did worry in the first place.*

Molly’s mother, Betty Dahle, had had Molly at sixteen as well. “Wish I had known which guy to pin it on so I coulda had me one of these,” Betty said, admiring her heavily-pregnant daughter’s wedding ring. She had shown up late for the ceremony in the Parkers’ backyard, her absence very conspicuous since the only other guests were Louisa, Michael, and Luke’s parents. “But I didn’t know till you popped out too brown to be that soldier’s. And then when I got around to writing that Indian when you were, like, six months old I get word back that he got himself killed in a bar fight. Useless,” she scoffed. “Wish you coulda been that soldier’s.”

It was as much as Betty ever expounded on Molly’s father. Molly picked up the rest around town. Betty’s own mother had run off with another man not long after Betty was born. The respect held for Betty’s father, John Dahle, whose family had been in Carlisle as long as anyone could remember, quickly turned to patronizing sympathy. “He could never control Betty,” Molly overheard one of her grade school teachers saying. “At fifteen, she talked some older friend into driving her up to Fort McCoy to hang around those soldiers. I guess that’s where she met those Winnebago Indian boys, too. The one that got her pregnant was ten years older than her!”

Hearing that at nine made Molly more curious, but the only thing she got out of Betty was the drunken curse of “damn dead Indian.” Grandpa John’s much nicer, “He’s with the angels now,” revealed just as little.

Grandpa John raised Molly with about as much help as he had raising Betty. He played father, mother, and playmate since Molly was virtually friendless until Louisa moved to town the summer before fifth grade. They met on Louisa’s first day in Carlisle. Sent by her mother to pick up some cleaning supplies at Carlisle Groceries and Meats, Louisa had walked in on a scene. The pleasant bell that announced her arrival was completely drowned out by a voice from her left. “I told you that you were never allowed back here! GET OUT NOW, MOLLY DAHLE, ‘FORE I CALL THE POLICE!” the old woman behind the counter hollered, flecks of thick, white spit on her cracked, salmon lips, the loose, pasty flesh beneath her chin shaking as furiously as the pointing finger.

Louisa’s eyes followed that finger to the right, expecting to see a grown woman at the other end of it, standing in front of the cigarette display that capped off the canned foods aisle, perhaps a very criminal grown woman, maybe even with a gun. But Louisa’s eyes skimmed downward and she found herself facing a girl her own age. A very belligerent, very tan girl in cut-off jean shorts and a tangerine tank top.

The girl’s eyes blazed black as coal. “Mrs. Jones, I ain’t done a damn thing wrong and you know it! You can check my pockets. I just came here to buy a jug of milk for my grandpa. I ain’t done nothin’!”

Mrs. Jones’ beady eyes narrowed. “Just listen to that mouth! You’ve got no manners, girl! And I don’t need to check your pockets to know you’ve stolen from me, you do it every time! No surprise, you dirty, half-breed bastard!”

Molly's face went purple, but before she could speak, Louisa did, appalled at the words she had just heard. "Hey, don't call her that! She's your customer! She's got a bottle of milk in her hand, let her buy it."

Mrs. Jones turned, her tight, steel wool curls moving first, then her wide hips and broad shoulders, to face Louisa. She eyed her like a fat frog lazily viewing a buzzing fly. She forced her lips upward to smile at her new customer. Louisa's long, neatly brushed, caramel hair, perfectly-pressed, sky blue sundress, and white sandals made Mrs. Jones believe she was dealing with a well-mannered girl from a good family, so she ignored Louisa's seemingly rude comments. "Good morning, Miss. Are you that new Dr. Carson's daughter? What can I help you with, dear?"

Louisa glowered. Mrs. Jones had been right about the good family, but despite anything her parents tried, Louisa did as she pleased. "You HAVE another customer. Why don't you ring her up?"

Mrs. Jones blinked and squeezed her stubby fingers together. "Dear, you just don't understand certain things about this town yet—."

"I understand that you're being a racist cow!" Louisa retorted, grinning at Molly.

Mrs. Jones' eyes got so wide, Louisa thought they would pop out of their flabby sockets. "GET OUT OF MY STORE, BOTH OF YOU!"

There was a magnificent smash as Molly dropped the glass milk jug she was holding, turned toward Louisa, and ran out the door. The two of them flew down Main Street, giggling hysterically until they reached the far west side where the town dramatically ended and County Highway PW began. The girls skidded down the loose dirt and gravel at the side of the road into a small ditch and plopped down in the brittle

grass. Molly finally stopped snickering long enough to introduce herself and point out, “You’re probably banned from there like me now, and you didn’t even do anything!”

Louisa shrugged, dragging her dusty fingers through her hair, “Oh well, I’ll just get the stuff my mom wanted somewhere else.”

Molly laughed again, loud and exhilarating. “You’re in Carlisle now, there is *nowhere* else.”

Louisa laughed with her, their giggles intertwining them into one unbridled girl-beast with limbs both pale and deeply tanned, eyes both green and brown, hair both wheat and coffee-colored, and two brains forever plotting how to get out of Carlisle.

But then, just two weeks after her thirteenth birthday, while she was watching the first snow of the year begin to fall outside of her English classroom, Molly got called down to the principal’s office. It wasn’t very uncommon. About seventy percent of the time that Molly got called down, it was her own fault—for beating up some boy, using foul language in front of a teacher, or smoking in the bathroom with Louisa—but the other thirty, was her mother’s fault. When she was drunk, Betty got a kick out of calling Molly’s principal. Half the time she called trying to convince him that it would be ok for her to take Molly out of school for a month because some guy had promised to take her and her kid to Honolulu or Barbados or Dallas or some exotic location like that. The other calls were to “voice her concerns” about her daughter. Betty was either sobbing, convinced Molly was going to kill herself, or pissed as a wrathful God because she thought Molly had taken her wallet, or worse yet, her bottle of whiskey.

Since Molly hadn’t done anything that day she got called out of her English class, she looked to her left, a disdainful expression falling across her regal, half-Winnebago

features, met Louisa's eyes, and grumbled, "my goddamn mother," as she loudly swung her long legs to the side, clambered out of her wooden desk at the back of the classroom, and strode leisurely toward the principal's office.

About three minutes later, there was an earsplitting scream that everybody later said was a "fuck you," the one and only "fuck you" that Molly Dahle got away with, but all Louisa heard was the uncontrollable, guttural wail that girls who are untouchable, unbreakable, make when their heart is shattered. A very rare and ugly sound. Louisa's panicked eyes flew immediately across the classroom toward the window to see her best friend running across the snow-blurred playground in nothing but her shabby blue jeans and the faded red t-shirt that Betty had brought back for Molly when one of her boyfriends had taken her to glamorous Dayton, Ohio.

Louisa knocked over her desk and took off after Molly. She ran more than a mile, down slippery, snow-covered streets and frozen fields to Molly's grandfather's farm. Louisa's lungs burned from sucking in the icy air, and her feet, tennis shoes, and socks, soaked through, were tingling, losing sensation by the time she got there. Louisa skidded to a halt just inside the barn door, her eyes darting up to the left, and landing on Molly, who stood in the haymow fiddling with the rope that they used in the summer to swing down from that enormous height, out across the barn to leap into piles of hay spread out on the floor. When she heard Louisa enter, Molly didn't even look up from the rope and her fumbling, frozen fingers trying to fashion it into a noose. "Don't you come up here, Louisa. Just leave me alone."

Louisa stopped at the bottom of the ladder that led to the haymow, craned her neck, and called, "I can't leave you alone."

“Sure, you can. Everybody else has.” Molly’s voice trembled on the word “everybody.” Tears began to pour down her face, blurring her focus on the rope. Not that it mattered, she couldn’t figure out how to tie it. She tossed it down angrily. It swung out and back. Molly caught it again and started wrapping it around her throat.

“What happened in the principal’s office?”

Louisa’s words were careful, but Molly snapped her reply anyway. “None of your damn business!” Molly regretted the sharpness of her words immediately. She sucked in air through her teeth, preparing herself for what she was going to say next. “Ok, fine. If you have to know, my grandpa’s dead. HE’S DEAD!” she shouted. She felt her knees get weak, and she let herself fall to a sitting position in the hay at the very edge of the loft.

Louisa, who loved Molly’s grandfather too, started shaking her head and muttering, “No. No. No,” while she climbed blindly up the ladder.

Molly didn’t tell her not to come any closer. Part of her wanted to. Wanted to threaten that if Louisa approached, she’d jump, but the other part of her needed Louisa up there with her. “Something exploded inside his head,” Molly continued. “That’s what Mr. Donovan told me. Explosion. Boom. Dead. I just don’t get it.” She started to sob. “He was just fine this morning. Just fine.”

Louisa reached the top of the ladder and crawled on her hands and knees through the hay over to where Molly was sitting. She stopped when she was about a foot away from her, not sure if she should reach out. Molly’s wind-burned cheeks were soaked, snot spilled down over her upper lip, and her bare arms shivered uncontrollably.

“I wanted to punch Mr. Donovan. I wanted him to be dead and my grandfather alive. Anybody but my grandpa. It should have been anybody but him.” Molly tugged

angrily on the rope, which was still wrapped loosely around her neck, the rough fibers scratching her skin. “Why couldn’t it have been my mother? She’s useless! She don’t give a shit about me. She tells me once a week that she wishes I was never born, wishes I was dead like my dad....” Molly trailed off, pushing the rope away and burying her face in her hands. Louisa placed her hand on Molly’s shoulder tentatively. Since Molly didn’t shrug her off, Louisa scooted closer and embraced her from behind, resting her head on Molly’s shoulder.

“I know,” Louisa told her softly. “I know.”

“I have nothing left now. Nothing,” Molly choked. “I just wanna die.”

Louisa peered through the wet tendrils of Molly’s long brown hair at the edge of the haymow. “You’ve got me, and if you jump, I jump.”

Molly’s body lost its rigidity and she let herself sink against Louisa, who pulled her backwards a safe distance away from the long drop to the floor. They lay in the hay until their teeth began to chatter, but before Molly could be convinced to descend the ladder, she insisted, “Promise you won’t ever leave me alone like everyone else has.”

“I’ll always be here for you,” Louisa swore, her green eyes fixed seriously on Molly. She had already started down the ladder, but waited to continue until Molly turned around and lowered her foot onto the first step.

Molly always said, “Louisa was the strong one. That girl was made of tough stuff. Born that way. Me, I just adapted.” And Molly’s gaze never betrayed what had changed, made Louisa run and break her promise to Molly, or how badly the broken vow stung.