

“What’s wrong with you?” Katie’s mother asks not for the first time. “Leave your hair alone. Finish the sign for the game. Get your hair out of your mouth.”

It’s Homecoming for the Malvern Bulldogs. Katie Cosby sits at the breakfast table staring at an unfinished GO BULLDOGS sign. Her mother retrieves more chocolate chip cookies from the oven for the snack bar at the football game. The school allows homemade cookies for fundraisers at athletic events after school hours. Players will sport new jerseys next season thanks to the Bulldog Moms and a love of chocolate chip cookies. The athletic department budget only goes so far.

For years, more than one Bulldog fan left a game with splinters courtesy of the ancient wooden bleachers. Some smart officer at the First National Bank of Malvern saw a marketing opportunity that would garner some much needed goodwill. Cushions decorated with the bank’s logo now are available for sale or rent at every game. Bank officers designated any money made to go to the athletic budget. As the only bank in Malvern and holder of numerous loans, it was the least they could do. The Malvern residents weren’t born yesterday though. After renting a cushion at the first game of the season - for the new jerseys, of course, they returned to bringing their old, softer cushion purchased at Sterling’s Dime Store.

Oddly enough, dull, shabby Brother Watson, pastor of Crossroads Church, rents a cushion at every game and buys a cookie from Emma Cosby at the snack bar. Members of Crossroads Church have no idea why he would come to a football game, and, in fact, some of them have started a campaign to replace him.

According to the leader of the search team, and the best chocolate chip cookie baker in Malvern, he was pleasant and cheerful and a snappy dresser when he first came to town.

“Weren’t you friendly with him years ago, Emma?” asks Margaret Ann Wrecker. Not waiting for an answer, she continues, “Now he’s sullen, unkempt, and gives dull, uninspiring sermons.”

Margaret had Emma’s attention. “Would it kill him to buy a new suit?”

Homecoming weekend puts most people in a good mood. Difficult discussions are put aside. Bankers and farmers don’t talk about loan extensions; Baptists and Methodists don’t talk about female pastors. The mood is different in the Cosby household. A year ago Katie’s sister Rachel ran away with the star quarterback. So Katie’s mom will be cranky all day and yell at Katie more than usual. Katie will write an angry text to Rachel which will go unanswered as usual.

“For God’s sake,” said Mrs. Cosby, apparently forgetting she grounded both of her daughters multiple times for saying that, “Quit chewing on your hair. And get a haircut.”

As long as it irritates you, thought Katie, the longer the better.

Both girls entered the world with blonde hair. Katie’s turned brown gradually and by kindergarten was the color she would live with until grey crept in. Her skin tanned easily and seldom burned.

Rachel’s pale yellow hair never darkened and her creamy little-girl complexion remained flawless, never showing the blemishes expected in the teen years. She kept her trademark wide-brim hat in her backpack for sunny days at the pool or at the lake.

Katie smiles remembering how Rachel never ignored her in public like some older sisters. If she tried real hard, she could still hear Rachel's voice, "Hey, Katie-baby, you and Aubrey come with me and Nicole to get fries." Rachel even came into Katie's bedroom sometimes at night to brush her sister's hair, and share her plans for after high school. But she never told Katie about her plans to run away.

Why didn't she tell me, thought Katie, I wouldn't have told.

Rachel and Brad Foster decided to leave school - and town - in the middle of their senior year sometime between the football game's winning touchdown and the DJ's first song at the dance.

"TOUCHDOWN!" shouted Mr. Baker from the announcer's booth. The band grew louder, the drums and horns deafening. The crowd went wild.

In the midst of the celebration, Rachel stepped down from the bleachers, row by row, waving her pom pom in the air. She slipped behind the bleachers unseen. Nicole continued cheering, never missing her friend.

The players patted each other on the back and jumped up and down like six-year-old soccer players. Carl did three handsprings and knocked over a cheerleader when he stuck his landing. After a dozen high fives with his buddies, Brad worked his way towards the gym but took a quick left at the ticket booth and made a dash to his old, silver Ford F150, tearing off his shoulder pads as he opened the door. He turned the key and drove slowly out of the parking lot with his lights off. No one noticed. While the celebration continued, Brad turned right onto main street and drove to the corner. Three blocks later he arrived at the oak tree in front of Crossroads Church.

Never coming to a full stop, Brad blinked his lights and Rachel ran out from behind the tree. She grabbed the door handle of the truck, pulled and jumped in. As the two drove slowly out of town, sounds of celebration still could be heard in the distance.

Caught up in the excitement of the win, no one missed the most popular couple in school until the first notes of the latest Taylor Swift song, and the Homecoming King and Queen didn't step out to dance. Nicole looked through the crowd for the peach-colored chiffon gown her friend had seen in Baker's window and saved her allowance to buy. Not finding Rachel, she pushed her way through the crowd and found Brad's best friend.

"Hey Carl, have you seen Brad?" Nicole had to shout above the deafening sound. "Rachel was supposed to meet me at the photo booth 30 minutes ago. She's not answering my calls or texts."

"Let's go outside," screamed Carl. In the hallway, Carl admitted, "I have no idea where he is. I would've sworn he was in the locker room celebrating with the rest of us, but now I'm not so sure. Everything was crazy. I've been looking for him since the dance started. I figured he was with Rachel. Do you think they . . ."

"Rachel never said anything about running away with Brad, and she would have told me. I know she wanted to get away from her mother, but she said she could stick out the rest of the year and then she'd be off to college."

After twenty-four hours passed and no one in Malvern knew the whereabouts of Brad and Rachel, the small town police department went to work. Officer Sloan, himself a graduate of Malvern High and former star defensive lineman, questioned everyone at the high school who had any contact with Brad or Rachel.

“Brad celebrated in the locker room,” said Jeremy, the team center. “He kept screaming we beat Stuttgart, we beat Stuttgart. I think that was Brad.”

“Rachel helped pick up cushions after game,” said her friend Lucy through tears.

“No, that was Ginny, not Rachel, picking up cushions,” said Lucy’s twin sister, Lily.”

“No it wasn’t.”

“Yes, it was.”

Officer Wilson graduated from Stuttgart High School and swears every football season that he’s neutral. He tries unsuccessfully to take his vacation when the rivalry falls on Homecoming. But Homecoming weekend always requires all hands on deck. He checked with the small hospital in Malvern that had one doctor, two nurses and 10 beds. The highway patrol reported an accident free weekend. The official determination: the teens ran away.

Three things happened on Monday morning. Moms of Malvern’s senior class gathered at *Missy’s Muffins and Luncheons* to discuss why they were certain that Rachel was pregnant and that the couple ran off to get married. Most of the senior class skipped school and met under the big oak tree in front of Crossroads Church to talk about the two runaways. Emma Cosby started her campaign to keep Katie from doing what her sister did - the part they were sure of and the part they were guessing at.

Now, a year later, folks in Malvern prepare to celebrate Homecoming and a rematch with the Stuttgart Lions, and Katie Cosby struggles to live with a domineering mother and a meek and timid father without her sister.

“Katie.” Her mother almost shouted. “Get your head out of the clouds and finish the poster. And don’t forget you’re riding home with your father and me after the game.”

“Why would I do anything else but spend Homecoming weekend with my parents? I sure don’t have any friends?” Katie said a little too loudly and with a little too much snark, but it was out before she could stop it.

“Don’t use that tone with me.”

Katie’s girlfriends used to come over. She would close her bedroom door and the girls would sprawl on the floor and share TikTok videos and talk about boys.

“Leave the door open, Katie,” her mother said the first time her friends came over after Rachel and Brad disappeared without a trace.

“Mom, we’re just talking and watching videos. Maybe doing each other’s hair,” Katie told her mother truthfully. But she left out that they were talking about Rachel and Brad.

“Rachel was so tiny. How could she hide being pregnant?”

“It’s like they vanished into thin air. No one could miss Brad’s truck.”

“Why hasn’t she texted or called anyone?”

“Why didn’t they just get married in Malvern?”

“What about finishing school?”

All questions. No answers.

Mrs. Cosby stood firm, “I know you girls are at an age when all you think about are boys, sneaking out, and who knows what other mischief. It’s just a small step to one of you doing drugs, getting pregnant or in some other kind of trouble.”

Katie’s friends couldn’t take it any longer. “What the hell, Katie,” said Aubrey. “Does your Mom think we’re all skanks and drug pushers?”

“Yeah,” said Gracie. “Let’s go to my house.”

“Mom, we’re going to Gracie’s to study. I’ll be home by dinner.”

“Gracie, don’t both of your parents work?” asked Katie’s mother.

“Yes, ma’am. But my mom gets home at four.”

“You can’t go, Katie, and I bet the rest of you girls wouldn’t be allowed if your parents knew that no adult was at Gracie’s.

“That’s not true, Mrs. Cosby,” said Olivia. “My mom knows Gracie’s parents, and she thinks it’s fine for me to be there when they’re gone. Besides, her mother gets home while we’re still there and brings us treats.”

The other girls nodded in agreement.

“Don’t be rude, Olivia, and I will pray that all you girls don’t end up in trouble before you graduate high school.”

The girls left but Katie’s mother wasn’t finished with her. “You just remember you’re not to go anywhere if a parent is not home, understand?”

I guess she really does think we’re deciding which boy we want to sleep with or maybe sending nude pictures to the football team, Katie thought.

Refusing to let her mother see her cry, Katie went to her room, formerly a private place for Katie to daydream or write in her journal. She always envied Rachel’s room, baskets piled in one corner and LED lights strung from the curtain rods. A huge fern dangling in a macrame hanger by the window. Before she left, Rachel was checking Etsy for the perfect rattan chair for another corner. When Rachel didn’t come back, Katie took the macrame hanger and fern to her room, but her mother gathered up the rest of the baskets, the lights and anything else that had Rachel’s stamp on it and took it all to the Thrift Shop. The room became a dull space lacking any

personality. Katie rescued the stuffed teddy bear that Brad won for Rachel one year at the Fair. Brad the Bear stays under Katie's bed during the day but comes out at night.

"Rachel, why did you leave me?" Katie texted. "Where are you? Please come get me. I can meet you at the old oak tree. You don't have to see Mom. Just text me when."

She cuddled Bob the Bear and cried.

A week after the Homecoming game, Katie notices her mother's mood is different. Is she humming - and smiling? What is she looking at? Katie takes a chance.

"Mom, after school I'm going shopping with Aubrey so you don't have to pick me up. I've been saving my money and I have enough for an outfit I saw in Baker's window."

The humming stopped. The smiling stopped. Her mother turned on her.

"And when were you at Baker's?"

Katie had to think fast to hide the fact that she had left study hall early Homecoming week and walked to the boutique with Aubrey to see the display of new clothes. If her parents found out, she would be home-schooled in the daytime and locked in her room at night.

"I meant I saw an ad in the paper and there was a picture of the cutest outfit." Katie was surprised her mother bought that lame excuse but fortunately the paper was in the trash covered in coffee grounds.

"The clothes at Baker's are not appropriate for teenage girls. I'll go with you to Dixon's to pick out a few things."

"Mom, teenage girls are Baker's main customers," protested Katie.



“You want to look like those girls in skirts so short you can see their underwear? And I tell you Diane Robertson needs to wear a sweatshirt over those bosoms, not those t-shirts so tight her nipples stick out.” The bright mood gone, Emma moved on to her favorite subject.

“Do you want to get the boys all sexed up? I bet my life Diane will be pregnant before the end of the year.”

Finally, Katie said what she was thinking, “Mother, Why are you taking it out on me that Rachel ran away? Besides I’ve never worn skirts so short my underwear shows and, by the way, neither did Rachel. And we don’t know that she was pregnant. I don’t have a boyfriend, and the friends I used to have won’t come here anymore because they feel like criminals being watched all the time. I can’t go anywhere there’s not a parent guarding me. I can’t walk around the block without being interrogated to make sure I’m not meeting someone. And I dress like an old lady.”

Katie saw the slap coming and braced herself, locking eyes with her mother even after it landed.

“Don’t be disrespectful. You can forget about shopping for clothes.”

“Like I would wear what you would buy me,” she said under her breath.

“What did you say? Go to your room and get your hair out of your mouth. What is wrong with you?”

There it is again, Katie thinks. “What’s wrong with you?” She should make that my ring tone.

Her mother wasn’t finished, “I’m making you an appointment to see Brother Watson after school tomorrow. Maybe he can talk some sense into you. Your father will pick you up and

drive you straight to the church so don't think you can sneak down to that dress shop. You will not be like your sister."

The pastor's office at Crossroads Church needed an update in the worst way. The floral wallpaper was peeling at the edges and to say the white gardenias had yellowed is being generous. The draperies bought at Bed Bath and Beyond by the Sojourners Sunday school class were once nice but now the Thrift Shop wouldn't want them. The oversized desk, a donation from someone cleaning out their basement, dominated the room. But it did sit in front of the double casement window. Years ago when his office and his mood were both brighter, David Watson would swing his chair around, throw open the curtains, and look at the big, old oak tree that stood right outside his office. While he worked, he could hear the birds chirping, the laughter of the women on their regular morning walk, and the happy chatter of the high school kids eating after-school french fries from the Dairy Queen a block from the church. A town landmark, that tree has been a meeting place for the young and old in the community for decades. A bench sits under the tree. Originally for Sunday school teachers who take their members outside, the bench has served young couples making plans for the future and old-timers reminiscing about how plans often change in surprising ways.

It's been well known for years that teenage couples meet under the tree in the middle of the night. Even now when the women on their walk stop for a water break, there's a lot of "Did you hear about the Case girl (or anyone not related to the speaker) meeting that new boy under the tree?" There's an equal amount of, "My daughter wouldn't sneak out. She's not like that."

It's been a long time since Brother Watson's mood and office were bright. Dark, brooding, and depressing were more like it. It's been a lot longer since he believed what he preached. A feat rarely accomplished in small towns, the Watsons managed to hide the truth about their marriage. Now that she is gone - in the permanent sense of the word - Brother Watson was hoping his mood would lift and his faith return. Maybe if his office looked bright and happy? He hoped someone would die - he didn't mean that like it sounds, or did he - and the family would ask that memorial be designated for redecorating his office. But even a bright, newly decorated office, he knew, wouldn't help his mood. He had to admit to himself that his spirit had been crushed for some time.

Brother Watson removes a key from the breast pocket of his coat and unlocks the center drawer of his desk. He takes out a yellowed envelope and from it he takes out a photograph whose colors are so dull a teenager would say it was old-timey. In the picture, a young man and woman are sitting on the bench under the old, oak tree. David Watson begins to smile and hum a familiar melody.

Shaking off the pleasant memory, he returns the photo to the envelope and the envelope to the drawer. After locking the drawer, he returns the key to his coat pocket.

The minister knows he can't counsel anyone, much less a young girl whose overbearing mother is so determined to keep her from running away, will probably succeed in doing just that.

Instead of going to her last class, Katie walks around to the side of the building, takes a short cut through the Fisher's yard and heads to the church. As instructed, her father parks the car

in front of the school and waits. After the crush of students coming out of the building becomes a trickle and Katie isn't there, he pulls away from the curb and heads home to report to his wife.

Katie makes it to the tree with plenty of time to spare before the kids from school show up with their fries and drinks. She puts down her backpack and removes several tacky skirts and old-lady dresses that a year ago had become her wardrobe. With the shears from her mother's sewing basket, Katie cuts the fabric and fashions a rope just long enough to throw over the limb of the old oak tree that once held the tire swing she loved when she was in kindergarten. The bench was against the tree. Perfect.

Maybe a little natural light will help my mood before Katie gets here, thinks Brother Watson as he pulls back the curtains.

Over the intercom at school came a voice, "Katie Cosby, come to the office. Your sister is here for you."