

The Lady Who Takes In Brianna
Y York

"Three hundred people with nothing to begin with, completely wiped out. Sunday, the day after the fire, I hear they're taking donations over at the school. The school is the no-man's-land between my street and the low cost housing developments just east, one of which burned down in this fire. I go to the closet, and anything I haven't worn in the last year goes in the box. The school gym is chaos. I look at my box and wonder how a size seven woman is even going to know to look in this box. I borrow a marking pen and write FEMALE SIZE 7, shoes 7 1/2. Behind me I hear, Just put it down and go. A harried agency guy. Maybe he thinks I'm going to steal. "Do you want me to start marking the boxes, the contents?" It hasn't occurred to anybody that things have to be labeled. So I sort and mark and re-box. Which is how I get to know the agency people, which is how they get to know me, which is why they call me about Brianna. Come in we want to talk to you about something. I don't know; that old thing about stealing occurs to me. I hope they don't think I stole, because I'm not going to be able to prove that I didn't. That's the thing about an emergency, you do what you have to do, and you don't worry about covering yourself.

Well, they don't think I stole. They want me to take Brianna. For a while. Become a foster household until Brianna's mother can finish her classes, find an apartment. This is the last thing I expect, I mean I've thought about it, who hasn't thought about it, but my life is a mess. I don't even know if I like living in a house and having a vegetable gardening. I don't know if I'm staying.

We sit silently for about three years, and I hear myself saying, How old is she? I vaguely hear answers: eight, school in the neighborhood, shelter. What I'm doing instead of listening to complete sentences is carving up my house, making a room for Brianna. I hear myself saying, she can have the room next to mine, I'll put my office in the basement; I'll need some help moving the bookshelves down. Just like that. They take care of the bureaucracy, I redecorate.

We all meet. Brianna stares at the floor. Dark clouds pass over her already dark face. I don't see her eyes, but I've been told they're blue. Coal black hair and olive skin. Blue seems so unlikely, but I don't find out because she doesn't look up. I'm very nervous when I return to pick up Brianna. Who knows what goes on in somebody else's head, particularly when somebody else is eight. Eight is a mystery.

We put her bag in the car. It's a bag, her bag. She stands by the passenger side. She doesn't look at me. Why should she, for her whole life she's heard don't get into a car with a stranger. "Let's walk around before we go." She looks at her bag in the car. "It's okay, I'll lock it." She looks unsure, so

I get the bag. I see a stuffed toy inside, and figure she wants the toy, and she does. We walk side by side. Just walking. I don't want to ask her questions. I've seen that with kids - their conversation with adults is adults asking questions and them giving one word answers. "How was school?" "Fine." I don't want to do that. She doesn't say anything, so I figure I'll tell her about me, how I came to live here after living other places around the world. I tell a story I don't tell so Brianna can get into a car with a person instead of a stranger. I start when I'm eight, making up those bits, I don't remember eight. It takes a while, I buy us cones and we sit and drip and wipe. Pretty soon, I stop because I feel stupid. We head to the car. We stop for a light and she takes my hand. Yeah, blue, sort of a midnight blue.

Everything changes, but nothing really changes. Generally, I go through my same scramble, I just have to be at school at two thirty every day. She brings home things for me to sign, permission slips for trips. I'm asked to be a parent chaperon, whatever they call it, on the aquarium trip, and I do it. Then, one afternoon she brings home a letter, sealed. I am very nervous, she's a little nervous. "You didn't do anything did ja?" She shakes her head. Brianna has an opportunity. The letter explains some program for which she has been selected. She's to go to a different school in a different neighborhood, if I give my permission. MY permission? MY permission? When did this happen they ask MY permission for something as important as that? I call the school. I'm uppity, I'm indignant, I'm outraged. I'm an asshole. They've already asked Brianna's mother. They need my permission because I'm the one responsible for her, and I'm the one's gonna have to see she gets to the bus every morning at six-thirty.

I attend a parent meeting about the program. We're all real proud, our kids have been selected. They tell us about special programs at the new school, I wonder why those programs aren't in our school, but yes, they're great, and I'm excited for Brianna, and feeling stupid again because I didn't know she was smart, but then I don't know eight so I don't know what's remarkable for eight. So, good. She'll be challenged and stimulated.

And Brianna takes the bus.

Well I'm there a half hour early to pick her up, so are a couple of the other parents. We try to be cool, but we're hopelessly excited. So are the kids, everybody rushing to his Mom or Dad to tell them all about it. Brianna's bursting. She got called on, she knew the answers, maybe she's going to go to fourth grade next week. Well this is big. I check my watch and turn the car around, heading to Brianna's mother's job. If I hurry, we can ride her to her night class. We do. It's a great ride. The two of them sit in the back, I go to a drive-through and buy us greasy food that we love. The two of them have confidences. Dolly, she's about the right age to be my daughter, but we've worked out a kind of peer thing based on our mutual

affection for Brianna. There are those think we could be friends, but they're wrong. There's resentment goes along with all gratitude.

We drop off Dolly and Brianna turns into the her that she is when it's just us. It's fine, it is, except it's so obvious to both of us at the moment when Dolly leaves, that I laugh. She says what, what are you laughing at. "Just nothing." She almost laughs, but catches herself; we have come to know one another. I think.

A few days at the school, Brianna makes a friend. This is the first time I've heard her mention another child, and I am very curious, but ever fearful of those one word answers, I don't ask. I wait, and little by little I hear about her friend, Jennifer. Jennifer is nine, Jennifer is in the fourth grade class that Brianna now attends, Jennifer lives in the neighborhood of the new school, Jennifer is beautiful. "What does she look like?" Her hair is fine. "Is she nice?" No answer.

Brianna comes home with a sweater I don't know. "What's that?" Jennifer. "She can't give you her sweater, her mother won't let her do that." Yes, she has a lot of sweaters, she wants Brianna to have this one. "Well, do you want to give her something back?" A glazed gaze I don't know, then, no. Great. Brianna doesn't think her stuff is nice enough to give, I mean that sweater is nice, it's wool that hasn't started to ball yet, I don't even know how you do that with a wool sweater. "Well, you want me to bake brownies or something, you can share?" I do, Brianna watching me the whole time, impressed that I don't use a mix, furious that I haven't made them before.

The brownies are a hit. Jennifer's mother, Mrs. Cabot, calls me. Brianna is invited. To their house. I look into the phone, I think, she can't go, what do you mean invited? You checking up on us, lady? I say, when would this be? She wants to pick them up Thursday after school, Brianna can stay for dinner, she'll drive her home. I let her go, of course, but it's very costly in anxiety. I worry she won't like the food, she didn't like any food I had; we ate McDonald's that first day. I worry they'll ask her things and she'll answer with one word answers, I worry something will be missing and Brianna will be blamed, well that's this personal thing I have, doesn't have anything to do with Brianna.

The car drives up about 7:30; I've been at the window for an hour. She drives the kind of car that the ad says, if you love your family you'll put them in one of these. It's that horrible mustard color. Why did she do that? I mean if she can buy that car, she can have the color she wants. I don't know what's expected. I don't go to the car, thinking maybe Mrs. Cabot'll come to the door, she doesn't.

Brianna bounces out and rushes into the house. Thank goodness she starts telling me things, I don't have to ask any

questions. They have a house on the water, there's a boat at a dock and they own it, they have a dog, and the dog has a house sounds as nice as ours. She didn't like the steak, though. Brianna likes her cow chopped and on a bun; that's my girl.

School becomes Jennifer, but Brianna keeps up with her assignments, so I have no moral high ground from which to complain. I'm worried about all this stuff that Jennifer has. We don't have anything like that. A few more visits to Jennifer's, and I tell Brianna to invite Jennifer to our house. We do, for an over night. I call and leave my name of odd consonants on the Cabot's answering machine. Yes. Jennifer may come. She rides home on the bus with Brianna; I meet them. "How do you do, Jennifer?"

They hardly notice me, but continue their play in the backseat. Jennifer is remarkable in her pallor. She's almost featureless, an amorphous creature with very pale hair. I didn't know when Brianna said her hair was fine, she meant her hair was fine.

Brianna shows her around; we're both nervous, afraid of comparisons, but eureka, the child is overwhelmed by the vegetable garden. We hoe and harvest for two hours, Brianna instructing Jennifer in technique. I let them wash the mud off the vegetables and make the salad. She loves our tacos and refried beans, she's never had them.

Jennifer goes to the bathroom. Brianna is beaming. Isn't Jennifer beautiful. It isn't a question but it's demanding that I respond. Yes, I say yes, quite beautiful. Pained that if this is her standard - what does she think of herself?

The time for pain passes as the two little girls take the food waste to the worm box. We're scoring in ways I could never have imagined. Jennifer wants to put the garbage in the worms. Eeks and eyus even from Brianna who feigns coolness when it's just us. Jennifer thinks Brianna's room is rad or fresh or awesome, something positive. My office, her room, to fill a couple of rainy weekends that Dolly had to work, we painted a rain forest complete with huge animals on the walls and ceiling. It isn't subtle. It's a dream.

Sometime in the night, Jennifer gets up to go to the bathroom. She's groggy and asks for milk. She sits next to me to drink it. I say, we're very glad she could come stay the night. She says, Oh yeah, I couldn't wait, Brianna told me you were rad.

Brianna said I was rad.

"Oh, well, I think Brianna's rad, too." She says, yes, Brianna is rad, and so beautiful; I wish I was that beautiful.

Oh. "Oh, Jennifer, you are, you are."

Eight.

Eight and Nine.

A mystery.