

## 1<sup>st</sup> Place - Fiction

Steal Away  
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The last time this happened I was in Shirley's foster home. Shirley said that I could stay there forever if I just acted right and at first I tried because the bed was so soft and warm, and Shirley smiled at me with all kinds of do-gooder promises and seemed to care. But then, like it always happens, Shirley started getting all cranky, and bitching about the food that had gone missing from the refrigerator and asking so damn many questions about where I was all the time and why she kept getting calls from the school saying I wasn't there. Shirley accused me of stealing food and said she had a girl like that before who hid food in her room, under the bed, in the drawers and closets and that it just got all nasty and the food was wasted and that she didn't have the money to let all that happen to her food. Shirley told me that I didn't have to do that, that if I didn't waste the food like that there would be food to eat every day.

But I wasn't hiding food. And I wasn't skipping school to do drugs like Shirley accused me of either, although sometimes I did smoke some weed, because well hell if you were me you would too, but still. I was "stealing" the food (so much for "what's yours is mine") after Shirley went off to work, and wrapping it up in paper towels and sticking it in my backpack. I had a metro bus pass for school but instead of getting on the bus to school, I'd head off in the other direction for downtown where I would go to Pioneer Square and look for my mom. I had heard from my aunt that my mom was in a bad way and that she was downtown again living near the courthouse and strung out. I would go find her, like my aunt said I should, I would find her and look after her a bit. I would tell her who I was and then give her the food and sometimes my mom would recognize me and sometimes she wouldn't, but no matter what I would still give her the food. She was still my mom.

When I didn't find my mom at the square, I would walk around under the highway overpass and look for her where everyone else was shooting up or sleeping and if I didn't find her there I would come back to the square and sit on a bench keeping a look-out, trying to avoid looking at the crazy guy who shouted shit at me and the slimy guy who told me I could score some if I did him "a favor," and the woman with the meth sores and the wrinkly skin that made her look really old, like she could be my grandma even though she might really be young enough to be my older sister I lost track of a long time ago.

Some days, I would sit there on the bench and wait and when I didn't see anyone who looked like my mom and I got tired enough of waiting and hungry enough myself, I would eat some of the food and leave the rest there on the bench. The pigeons could eat it then, for all I cared, or the woman in the wheel chair or maybe even that woman's dog, the scraggly one with the American flag bandana tied around its neck.

Anyway, when this happened to me before when I was 14 and staying with Shirley, I told her I was pregnant and she had a fit. She hollered and screamed and called me a whore. She demanded to know who the father was and when I told her that was none of her business, the only thing Shirley wanted to know was how old he was and when I told her he was in high school, she looked all relieved. Then I realized that Shirley probably thought it might be her boyfriend, not that he hadn't tried to get with me, but I hated that guy, acting like he was some sort of hero around Shirley and then getting all up in my space and weird with his hugs when

Shirley wasn't around. At least my mom's boyfriends were always straight up about what they wanted, and didn't pretend to be all about being there to help me out. Shirley told me that no matter who the father was, and she really didn't want to know, I still was going to have to get an abortion and she would help me get one and that no one needed to know, not even the caseworker. She told me if I thought I was going to be able to keep that baby I had another thing coming, that even if I had that baby they would only take it away and I would wind up living in some group home after the baby was born and the baby would be adopted by someone else.

I got an abortion, but afterwards I had nightmares and I got scared. The nightmares weren't really about the abortion; they were about being suffocated by sweaty men whose faces I never saw. They were about the tastes of sex and they were about being scared and hurt and I kept waking up with cramps. I couldn't tell anybody what I had done or about the nightmares, but I thought that telling my mom would be like telling nobody and she would just sit there and maybe she would be too strung out to say anything and that would be good. I just needed to tell someone and then maybe the nightmares would stop.

I did find my mom that day but of all days for her to be able to hear and understand what I said, it had to be that day and after my mom ate the food I brought her and heard what I had done and about the nightmares—the sights, smells and tastes of them—I sat there all drained and almost crying even though crying is not something that I do. My mom shook her head at me, the white cream from the Twinkie she had just finished still smeared at the corners of her mouth, the Twinkie that I had given her from Shirley's kitchen cabinet, my mom said, "They say I'm a shitty mother? But I didn't kill you, did I?"

I ran away.

I ran away from my mom. I ran away from Shirley. I was found. I was brought back. I did time in juvie and was supposed to be writing a stupid essay about why I ran away and how I would never do it again but I refused because whatever I would say would be lies anyway and honestly I didn't mind detention. It was better than living with confusing people who were supposed to act like family but they weren't and every one of them had their own set of rules and weird food, and other crazy kids who stole your stuff. But then they let me out of juvie, because I guess they couldn't keep me there forever, and they put me in a group home and there were more rules there and there was this big board with everyone's name on it and the stars that we earned for making our beds and going to meetings, and then the stars were taken away for doing bad stuff like getting into fights or screaming at a staff person and you had to have a certain number of stars for a certain period of time before they would let you do just the most simple things like go to the school in the neighborhood instead of the school in the group home. And you had to go to group therapy; you got stars for doing that and stars were taken away if you didn't talk and it was all such a crock of shit that when I finally did earn enough stars to step out the door, I left and told myself I was never going back.

I avoid my mom now though; I live on different streets in a different part of the city, away from the old sick crazy people. I don't hate her. I just can't be around her right now. Here everyone creates their own families and each one is different. Some of the families didn't want anything to do with me when I first showed up, they avoided me because I was too young, only fifteen, and they didn't want to get in trouble. The shelters are the same way when you aren't legal. You can stop by, but you better not stay too long or they have to report you. On the streets, I am not a legal person, but I feel like I am still more of a person somehow than I am when I am in the group home and a name on a bulletin board with no stars.

Eventually though I found my place with a boyfriend who saw to it that I mostly had what I needed; he said he would protect me and I pulled my own weight first with the spare-changing and then when times got rough I started making better cash for us both. I haven't told him what I suspect because I'm pretty sure he will get mad. Lately when he gets mad, he turns nasty. And now I'm not even sure who the daddy might be. It could be him. It could be anyone he set me up with. This one will be everybody's child and nobody's child, and all mine.