

HOMECOMING

Wilmington, Delaware
Summer, 1960

The driver's name was Woody Hicks. He lived next door to my real mother and my real father. The garbage truck we were riding in was his. And I was going home. None of which pleased me.

"The missus sure seems nice." The driver didn't know Mama Cope and I resented his sliding in some comment like he did. I pushed myself closer to the door and stroked Sissy Jupe's big, orange head. "My pretty kitty," I said, cutting him off. Sissy was sleeping in the folds of my pinafore, hiding the pink tulips that Mama Cope had embroidered into the shape of a heart. Mama Cope was my foster mother. When she put my suitcase on the seat next to the driver, she straightened my ponytail with her long, soft fingers. Then she told me to be good and promise I wouldn't be stubborn. I did, but she knew I was hopeless so she just gathered me up in her arms and laughed.

"Just don't go getting yourself in any trouble," she said, pulling a hankie out of her pocket and dusting the tops of my new pink leather shoes. "I hope to visit real soon." Then she let go and I could see her eyes filling up with tears.

That was two years ago. I was ten. And before my real parents came into the picture, I was happy. Mama Cope had raised me from the time I was two months

old and we had gotten used to each other. Her husband, James, died when I was three. I don't remember him much, except that he was a quiet man and smoked fat, smelly cigars from a can.

After he died, Mama Cope did her best to bring me up right. She taught me how to garden and talk to Jesus and make cutout snowflakes from tissue paper.

Suddenly I was supposed to forget all that. Give it all up as if it were nothing more than a big balloon with the air sucked out. Gone. And all I could see I had for it was a ride in a smelly garbage truck and Mama Cope's sweet face looking after me as we pulled away. When we were almost out of sight, I saw her pick a marigold from her garden and wave it above her head. I didn't wave back. I wanted to, but I didn't. Waving was too much like saying good-bye for good. So I leaned my face to the window and watched Mama Cope fade from view like a passing road sign. Then everything was gone. The red maple tree she and I grew from a seedling, the metal rooster standing on the roof pecking at the wind, even the pale chalk lines of my last hopscotch game. I remembered how Rita Rosini and I had played in the street with the sun beating down on our bare shoulders. As usual, I won. Rita had as much coordination as a cow. And that's the truth. But we both collected baseball cards and liked Nancy Drew mysteries. I would've liked her even more if she hadn't been such a big bragger. I never had much use for braggers, but I made an exception in Rita's case because she loved baseball almost as much as I did. Before moving to Delaware she'd lived in the Bronx, one block from Yankee Stadium. There, she said, statues of ballplayers like Babe Ruth and

Lou Gehrig stood at every intersection and if she opened her bedroom window she could hear the announcer's voice almost as clearly as if she were sitting behind home plate. The Yankees was my team – reliable, handsome – and, I didn't even mind when Rita got some of the details mixed up and moved the stadium to Brooklyn and Lou Gehrig's statues over to where Babe Ruth's had been. Rita was different than most braggers. She had a soft heart. When she learned I was moving she gave me every one of her baseball cards. Even her Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris cards.

I was thinking about all this, when what happens but I catch a glimpse of Rita in her mother's station wagon. I ducked fast because the last thing in the world I wanted was for them to see me riding in a garbage truck. Even so, I had to fight the urge to take one more look around. I don't know why, but I had this terrible fear that I had to hold on to every last detail or one day I might start to forget who I am. And I had vowed I would never let that happen, no matter what.

"Couldn't help noticing your cat's blind," the driver said. He was puffing on a Lucky Strike, which hung from his lip, cowboy style. He steered with both hands, letting the ash fall onto his lap, then brushing it off every so often without taking his eyes off the road. "Got a glass eye myself."

I didn't answer, but he was saying all the right stuff. I couldn't help being interested. I rested my feet on the metal hump in the floor over the engine and twisted sideways. His eye looked real enough, though it didn't move at all. Just sat

there. Like a pale blue star with its light almost gone. I kept hoping it wouldn't fall out.

"Mighty healthy-looking cat," he said, between puffs. I noticed that his voice was softer than his face, which was the color and texture of worn leather. But it was a nice face, and his glass eye, as smooth as a robin's egg, gave it character. Every now and then I would check his eye to make sure it was where it was supposed to be.

Sometimes, when I was checking, I almost said something. Once I was about to call him Woody, but I caught myself. I reasoned that if I let my guard down, my memory might go soft and I might change into somebody I didn't even know. I saw it happen on *Wagon Train* once. An Indian boy went to live with white folks and, in no time flat, he forgot all about being Indian.

I lifted Sissy's head and smiled into his glowing gold green eyes. "Good Boy, I said. Sissy's eyes didn't have pupils; light bounced off of them like two colored mirrors.

"Guess you thought you had yourself a girl cat when you named him," the driver laughed.

I wasn't about to let myself get trapped into a long conversation, so I directed my words at the half-closed window. No way, I mouthed.

We drove onto a two-lane highway. I was bored so I unzipped the front pocket on my suitcase and slid my hand in. The pocket was deep and I had to push aside a pile of baseball cards to find what I was looking for. "Finally" I whispered,

opening a small book to page two twenty-three. There, as smooth and pretty as a store-bought hankie, was the last tissue snowflake that Mama Cope made me. It was pink and had a house in the center and lots of flowers around the edges. I was about to read, but I reminded myself that I needed to study my surroundings. I put my book back and stared out the window.

The driver threw me a glance. "What's your book called?"

"*Hard Times*," I mumbled. I could've said how the man that wrote Scrooge wrote it and how Mama Cope read it to me and how it's a hard book to read, but I didn't. I could've also said how Sissy Jupe, a smart circus girl, is in the book, and that would've cleared up his question about my cat's name. But I didn't mention that either. Instead, I kept staring out the window.

It stayed quiet for a long while. Then the driver pulled his cigarette from his lip and his voice came back.

"Feel free to roll your window down more," he said, throwing his cigarette out. "Gets pretty hot in here."

He didn't mention the smell. I thought about how when somebody farts, they look around hoping they're the only one who can smell it. Of course, they aren't. Even so, Mama Cope said it's good to let them think so. I reasoned the same kind of thinking applied to this situation. So I lowered my window and stretched my arm across the empty space.

"Better?" I said, and rested Sissy Jupe's chin on my arm. The sun was strong and a gentle breeze lifted my newly trimmed bangs.