

IZZY AND GRANDMA LOU

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No one in first grade liked Ms. Taylor, but Martene was the only one who blamed Izzy. “You come and Mrs. Pence goes,” Martene accused at recess, she and Izzy surrounded by a circle of girls for a stand-off only Martene had known was coming. She lowered her voice. Too loud called a teacher to your side, no matter the school or the teacher. “Mrs. Pence’s baby was supposed to come in June, not April.”

“That’s right,” another girl called out, sounding as if this was news she’d forgotten.

“It was you,” Martene said.

“You, you, you,” came from too many circle girls for Izzy to tell who was accusing and who wasn’t. Ms. Taylor, busy talking with other teachers, didn’t come over to break them up. What kind of teacher did that make her? But then the bell rang and recess and Martene’s circle was over.

Izzy had started Fairway Elementary a week and three days ago, certain this would be the school where she would fit right in. It was much bigger than the others, had more students than her last two schools put together. Didn't that mean it would be the best of the five she'd been in since starting first grade last fall? Until today, she'd been hopeful.

When Izzy told Grandma Lou about the baby arriving early, her grandmother said teachers should plan better. Izzy didn't know about plans. All she knew was that she'd really liked Mrs. Pence, who'd remembered her name on the first day and never got her mixed up with Martene like Ms. Taylor did.

After that playground circle, Izzy was glad only a few weeks of first grade were left because she knew the chances of making a friend in Ms. Taylor's room weren't good. What she hadn't expected after the circle was no one talking with her unless they shared an assignment. Katie K. didn't count. They sat together in the cafeteria, but after saying hi and agreeing Ms. Taylor was mean—probably the meanest teacher in the whole school—neither of them could come up with anything else. Katie K. ate half her ham sandwich as fast as she could, then left the lunchroom for a playground swing. Izzy finished whatever Grandma Lou had packed. By the time she made it to the playground, all the swings were taken. Katie K. never offered to share hers and

neither did anyone else. Izzy didn't know what Katie K.'s sin had been, and should've asked but never did. She also didn't ask why Katie K. ate only ham sandwiches and only a half every day. Where did the second half of those sandwiches end up?

When the term ended, Izzy and Grandma Lou were still at Rochelle's. The two ladies didn't much like each other, though they'd been sisters-in-law long ago. Grandma Lou claimed Rochelle still held the divorce against her when it had been Rochelle's brother who'd been the jackass, running around, spending money they didn't have on booze and the ladies. When he drained their bank account the fourth time, what else was she supposed to do? "Forgiveness is a virtue," Rochelle liked to say. Izzy figured that was why she let them sleep on her sofa.

Rochelle's apartment had the one bedroom, a kitchen barely big enough for a full-sized person, and a bathroom with a shower—no room for a tub. "So now she has to have a tub?" Rochelle stared at her, but Izzy was positive she'd never asked for a tub.

"Not what I told you," Grandma Lou said, she and Izzy side by side on the sofa.

“A shower’s plenty good.” Rochelle pulled the wooden handle of her recliner, extending the footrest so she could lounge comfortably.

Izzy looked down at Grandma Lou’s right shoe, the toes lifted up then down, up then down. Grandma Lou didn’t say anything more but, oh, how she wanted to.

The best part about Rochelle’s place was the living room, plenty big, with two recliners, a coffee table, a side table with a lamp, a mounted television, and a sofa bed. That bed was as comfortable as anybody could want, Grandma Lou said. What they owned was stacked in a corner of the room, hard to reach but safe. No chance of anybody sneaking into Rochelle’s to mess with what was theirs. “Besides,” Grandma Lou said, “what do we need with lots of space?” Grandma Lou and Izzy weren’t big enough to need a lot of room.

Most mornings, beginning in early April when they’d moved in, Grandma Lou set an alarm and she and Izzy got out of bed at five-thirty, the time Rochelle got up for her shift at the nursing home. Grandma Lou said it was important to show Rochelle they were taking good care of her place and a big part of that was making sure their nighttime bed was back to being a daytime sofa before Rochelle left. The only exceptions were Sundays and most Wednesdays, Rochelle’s usual days off. Some days, she was off Tuesday or

Thursday instead of Wednesday because the home liked to mess with her. Izzy got to where she didn't want to know whether she'd be waking to that early morning buzzer or left to wake on her own.

On her days off, Rochelle liked to sleep in, sometimes as late as ten-thirty or eleven. "Too late for a grown woman to be staying in bed," Grandma Lou whispered. She and Izzy tiptoed around, ate breakfast without saying a word, and kept the set turned very low.

On work days, as soon as Rochelle pulled the apartment door shut and her footsteps faded down the hallway, Izzy spread her blue blanket—many, many shades of blue, too many to count (and she'd tried)—across the sofa, placed Grandma Lou's pillow on one end and hers on the other. Sometimes they both fell back asleep, snug under that warm blanket, but never past eight. Grandma Lou had an automatic alarm in her head that woke her by eight at the latest. Izzy didn't have an alarm in her head and was glad of it.

Some mornings only one of them or neither of them slept, but they still lay there, Izzy cocooned between the sofa back on one side of her and Grandma Lou's legs on her other side, making sure she didn't accidentally roll to the floor. "When your mama comes for you, I don't want her saying I let

you get broke.” She laughed, but Izzy didn’t see anything funny about getting broke.

Today, the last Tuesday in July, neither she nor Grandma Lou could fall back asleep after Rochelle grumbled her way out of the apartment and to work.

“I tell you one thing, Iz,” Grandma Lou said from her end of the sofa. “I’m getting sick of this old bed.” She reached up to slap the armrest twice. “Not even a real bed.”

“It’s a real bed at night,” Izzy said. When they’d spent those weeks with Grandma Lou’s church friend Tracey, Izzy had slept on a pile of blankets in the living room. “Wherever you sleep at night, you call that your bed,” Grandma Lou had said from her spot on the loveseat, too short for even Izzy to stretch out. Izzy lay on the floor, covered with a sheet and her special blanket, her grandmother on a loveseat. Their beds.

“You shouldn’t forget what a real bed looks like,” Grandma Lou said now. “That’s all I’m saying here.”

If she got to forgetting what real beds looked like, all she had to do was open Rochelle’s bedroom door, kept shut night and day.

Rochelle was also getting sick of them. Izzy could tell. Didn’t make a difference how hard they worked to show they were taking good care of her

place. Didn't matter that Grandma Lou had made her famous lasagna five times or her spaghetti and meatballs—not as famous but just as delicious—seven times. Didn't matter that between the two of them, she and Izzy kept the apartment sparkling. “Place looks lots better than when we moved in,” Grandma Lou said, and Izzy thought the same. None of that mattered. They were about to get the heave-ho, as Grandma Lou called it. Izzy had only been wrong on the heave-ho once and not all the way wrong, just off by a week.

“Your mama comes for you, puts you in a nice, soft bed and what will you be saying? Mama, this thing's too soft, all cozy and comfortable. Can't even tell what it is.”

When Grandma Lou pretended to be Izzy, she used a singsong, high-pitched voice that didn't sound one bit like Izzy and made her mad. But she never stayed mad for long, and Grandma Lou said that was something to be proud of. Mad people slowed down the world. Izzy had spent a long time thinking on what that meant but still wasn't sure.

Grandma Lou grabbed Izzy's big toe, gave it a wiggle and a pull. No cracks. Too bad. Izzy liked hearing her bones crack. “What're you thinking about, my little cabbage head?”

They were definitely moving. The only times she was “little cabbage head” were when they were about to move or had just arrived at another new place.

“Well?” Another toe pull, this time the extra-long middle one on her left foot. A satisfying crack. If all her toes were as long as her middle ones, she’d have four hands instead of two. Imagine what she could get done then, Grandma Lou said.

“Rochelle’s getting tired of us,” Izzy said.

Grandma Lou gave a loud sigh as if the idea hadn’t occurred to her, but Izzy’s mention made it undeniable. Most times they moved, Izzy ended up feeling responsible because she was the first to say the words out loud. She’d tried clenching her teeth, chewing the inside of her cheek, looking up at the ceiling or down at the floor and, still, words jumped out of her mouth and in a few days they were packing.

“What about us?” Grandma Lou said. “She thinks we’re not getting tired of her?” She threw the blanket off herself, swung her bare feet to the floor. Another toe pull. The right middle but no crack.

Izzy sat up, pulled the blanket all the way to her chin until only her head peeked out. Rochelle didn’t skimp when it came to AC because if there was

one thing she could not abide, it was sweat. “Good, clean sweat never hurt anybody,” Grandma Lou said when Rochelle wasn’t around.

The living room had two south facing windows and once the sun was fully risen, the place warmed quickly. But for now, not yet seven, the blanket felt good. This was hers, not Rochelle’s or Grandma Lou’s, though she didn’t mind sharing the blanket with her grandmother. It had been her mama’s and when her mama left to get away from people pulling her down—she was coming back for Izzy as soon as she straightened things out, and that was a promise—the blanket became Izzy’s. Only fair, Grandma Lou said. Izzy was sure no other girl starting second grade in a few weeks had her own full-sized blanket, big enough to cover a full-sized bed for a girl and her grandmother.

“You cold?”

“I’m not,” Izzy said.

“Your mama left you a good blanket.” Grandma Lou liked reminding her that, when it came to blankets, Izzy was in good shape.

Most second graders would ask what was coming next. Where were they going? Who were they staying with? What’s the name of her new school? But once Izzy spotted another move, she liked Grandma Lou announcing the details without being asked a single question.

They were both quiet for a long while. Izzy liked those moments of silence when she was thinking and, next to her, Grandma Lou was thinking. Sometimes she wondered what floated in her grandmother's head and guessed her grandmother wondered the same about her.

Up until this morning, Izzy had spent much of her thinking time on how to be so nice to Martene that the girl would forget all about Mrs. Pence. While they'd probably never be friends, at least they wouldn't be enemies. Now it looked as if she needn't have bothered thinking up ways to get into Martene's good graces. Izzy hated wasting her thinking time. She had too much to work out to throw her mind at problems that stopped being problems without help from her.

A loud exhale came from Grandma Lou and that meant she couldn't hold back on the news much longer, had to let it spill even without prompting from Izzy.

She clutched her blanket tighter, though sunlight was peeking through the windows and lighting the room. Maybe they'd go back to Cousin Ashley who had two daughters, one a year older and the other a year younger than Izzy. She didn't much care for those girl cousins, who had allergies and kept sneezing all over the place. Sometimes, Grandma Lou said, those girls made

themselves sneeze. How could a person manage that? Izzy had tried to do it herself but couldn't.

While she didn't care for her sneezing cousins, she appreciated their toys, even old ones meant for babies. In that category, her favorite was a red apple rattle, much bigger than the biggest apple—too big for a baby to hold—and much shinier than the shiniest apple. But a baby could grab the stem and shake or give a push and the rattling noise would make her laugh. A baby like that would be happy every day with lots of toys, not just the apple. She'd have nothing to worry over. At night and for daytime naps, she'd sleep in the same crib in the same bedroom she'd used since her parents brought her home from the hospital.

In the regular kid category, Izzy's favorite cousin toy was a dollhouse which clamped shut but could be opened to reveal every room, home to a family of mother, father, sister, and brother. Grandma Lou was sure there had been a grandmother once. Those sneezing girls had probably sneezed her into a corner, maybe under a bed where the lonely grandmother waited to be found. Izzy had searched and searched but hadn't found the doll. Grandma Lou was still sure the little grandmother was around somewhere. Who knew where those girls had sneezed her?

The dollhouse also had furniture just the right size for those dolls. You could move everything, furniture and family, from room to room. Six rooms altogether. A kitchen and bath, living room, two bedrooms, and a sixth room that could be anything you wanted. Sometimes a third bedroom. Sometimes a playroom. Sometimes a pantry. Izzy always voted for a third bedroom because she wanted the boy and girl each having their own room.

Some days, the cousins and Izzy crammed all the tiny furniture into three rooms. The bathroom and kitchen always had to be separate, the older cousin insisted, and the family needed a bedroom. That arrangement was okay with Izzy and her younger cousin. Three bare rooms gave the dollhouse a very different look and Izzy had never decided whether she liked so much empty space. What would the doll people do with all that emptiness? Go into a room to be alone? And what would that feel like? Would they sit on the floor or lie down and stare up at the ceiling? She wouldn't mind going back to the cousins and working out answers to those questions. She was older now and probably all the sneezing would hardly bother her at all.

"Got myself a new job," Grandma Lou said, not the news Izzy had expected.

"Another one?"

“A fine one,” she said as if all the others had been barely tolerable.

The one question had escaped, but now Izzy went silent again. If she urged Grandma Lou forward with more questions, who knew where they might end up?

“You heard of National Inn, the All-American place to lay your head?” She sounded like a TV commercial.

Izzy shook her head.

“Never?” Incredulous.

Another head shake.

“Well, it’s a fine place, one of the best motels you can find anywhere.” She stared at Izzy, daring her to say different. But what did Izzy know of motels? “We’ll live there and I’ll work there and we’ll have it better than we’ve ever had it.” Her voice rose with enthusiasm as she reached the end of what she had to say. That was Izzy’s clue to sound enthusiastic too, though she’d never heard of National Inn, the All-American place to lay your head. Was that an official motto or had Grandma Lou made it up?

“Is it close to here?” Not the most enthusiastic of questions but the first thing that came to her.

“That the best you can say for yourself?”

“If it’s close, I might be at Fairway again.” All the time she’d spent turning over how best to get on Martene’s good side wouldn’t be wasted. Maybe they’d even be in Mrs. Pence’s class again, Mrs. Pence deciding she hadn’t spent enough time with these students and moving up to second with them.

“What have I told you about schools?”

She’d tried to believe one was as good as another but so far hadn’t convinced herself and sometimes wondered whether Grandma Lou really believed that. After some thinking, she decided her grandmother hadn’t been in school for years and didn’t remember what they were like. If she remembered, she’d know schools were definitely not all the same.

“The National isn’t far,” Grandma Lou said, “but my guess is you get a new school.” She was nearly as enthusiastic about that as she had been about the motel.

“Maybe we can visit Rochelle, bring over your famous lasagna.” Plus, maybe Rochelle would pick up brownies for dessert. Izzy liked those rare brownie treats nearly as much as she liked the famous lasagna but knew better than to say that.

“Hmm,” Grandma Lou said, which is what she said when she knew the answer but wanted to keep it to herself. “Wonder how long before the toilet goes scuzzy on Rochelle.” She gave a satisfied “hmm.”

In three days, they were out of Rochelle’s and in the National Inn. July 31. Izzy took it as a good omen that they moved before August, the month school started.

There were three things she liked about the National Inn. Number one: The outside was mainly brick, more solid than wood or shingles. Number two: A large planter with marigolds, scraggly but cheerful with their bright oranges and yellows, sat next to the entrance and showed someone took care of this place. Number three: Their room had a very large, very real bed and a TV that worked without jiggling the remote.

Grandma Lou’s list of three started with the coffeemaker. Izzy didn’t drink coffee but understood how important those morning cups were to her grandmother. Second, the room was for only the two of them. If they felt like sleeping in, there was nobody to stop them. If they were in the mood for *Price Is Right*, there was nobody to say she was tired of all that happy screeching and make them turn off the set. Number three was that there was no bus to catch

for work because now Grandma Lou worked and lived at the same place. She made that last sound like what she'd been waiting for her whole life.

But there were also three things Izzy did not like about the National Inn. First, nice as it was, their room was on the second floor. If there was a fire or a tornado, first floors were always best. Her grandmother said fires and tornadoes were TV catastrophes, had nothing to do with them, and Izzy was too young to be worrying over someone else's catastrophes. Izzy still kept the second floor on her list of dislikes.

Number two was not knowing where exactly they were living. She'd at least had a vague idea of how to get from Tracey's to Ashley's to Rochelle's. Here, she had no idea at all. If she walked to Independence Avenue, which ran in front of the National, and turned left, where would she end up? Grandma Lou had said they were close to Rochelle's, but what exactly did "close" mean?

Number three was running into the same strangers over and over. She and Grandma Lou weren't the only ones staying here more than a night or two. Grandma Lou was grateful for those long timers because they took care of their own rooms and that meant less work for her and Gracie, who also cleaned

rooms but didn't live in any of them. Being surrounded by strangers was unsettling. "Well go up and say hello," Grandma Lou said when she heard Izzy's third complaint. Even as she agreed to this, Izzy knew she wasn't doing it.

So far, besides her grandmother, Izzy knew four people at the National: the Patels, who owned the place, Gracie who cleaned the place, and Hattie who lived here and had stood guard as they carried their belongings from the sidewalk where Rochelle dumped them to the second floor. Rochelle was in too big a hurry to lend a hand moving them all the way up the stairs and into their room. "I see," Grandma Lou had said politely, in case they ended up needing more nights on that sofa bed. But she still aimed a nasty look at the Fiesta's rear bumper as Rochelle waited to make a left on Independence, traffic too heavy for a fast getaway. Grandma Lou gave a satisfied, "Hmm."

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Until Edgeway Elementary started—Izzy had never heard the name and it sounded far away from Fairway and her other first grade schools—she was on her own while her grandmother worked. Grandma Lou was still saying this was her best job ever. Maybe Edgeway Elementary would last all the way through second grade.

Grandma Lou and Gracie didn't start work until eight and were usually done by two. When Gracie had a day off, all the cleaning fell on Grandma Lou, but even then, she was usually done by four, three-thirty if she skipped lunch and really put her mind to it. All Izzy had to do while her grandmother worked was stay out of trouble and especially away from the front desk where she might make a pest of herself—an insult, because even Rochelle never called her a pest.

First thing every morning, before breakfast or anything else, Izzy added a hash mark on the National Inn page of her pink spiral notebook where she tracked how long she stayed places. The notebook fit in the palm of her hand, and pages were set aside for Rochelle, Ashley, and Tracey. Grandma Lou had found it in a booth back when she worked at Cracker Barrel, brand new with not a single entry on any page. "Somebody doesn't want her pink notebook? I know a girl who does," Grandma Lou had said when she handed it to Izzy, both of them still living with Tracey but about to move to Cousin Ashley's. She gave Tracey's page twenty-six hash marks because Grandma Lou wasn't sure whether they'd been with her twenty-four days or twenty-eight. The twenty-six was a good guess, right in the middle, but Izzy was still dissatisfied. If they ever returned to Tracey, she was giving her a whole new page, one that

wasn't just a guess. And if Izzy ever reached 365 in the notebook, she'd stop, because staying somewhere for a full year would mean that's where she belonged. No need to keep counting.

They'd been at the National three full weeks, an important milestone. Twenty-one days meant she'd been around long enough to be settled.

This morning was her third Monday. Mr. Patel had warned that Mondays were always busiest for the cleaning crew. Grandma Lou did not believe only two people could be a crew, but she didn't tell him that. He was right about Mondays though. After the hiccup of weekend travelers, more rooms waited for cleaning on that day than on others. Both Monday evenings, Grandma Lou had Izzy microwave a mac-and-cheese. That and carrot sticks from the mini fridge was dinner. Grandma Lou usually had much more of an appetite. Eating so little meant she was really tuckered. That second Monday of mac-and-cheese was also when Grandma Lou started her own list of bads, no stove being number one. Famous lasagna never came out of a microwave or off a hot plate.

This morning, after Grandma Lou left, Izzy opened the curtains in case anyone interesting passed by, then turned on the set. *Wheel of Fortune*—re-runs, but what did she care?—wasn't her best show because hardly anyone bought an "I" first. Still, it was better than nothing. Afterwards came *Family*

Feud and an hour of *Price is Right*, Grandma Lou's number one program. With it being Monday, she wouldn't be dropping by for a few rounds. If she ever got picked for that show, she'd win everything, sweepstakes included, because she knew what everything cost. She only made a mistake when the show used Hollywood prices instead of regular prices. Izzy agreed that wasn't fair. The host should warn when he was going Hollywood on his prices.

In the middle of *Fortune*, Izzy heard wheels rattling and jumped to stand behind the curtains where she could peer out without being seen. It was Hattie, off to get groceries at the Foodway down Independence Avenue. After three weeks, Izzy knew a few places she'd end up if she turned left on Independence.

Izzy liked Hattie but Grandma Lou said the woman was too harebrained to be roaming the National on her own. She said this as if she, not the Patels, were in charge. No surprise. Grandma Lou, no matter where they stayed, liked to be in charge.

"Morning." Izzy stepped outside but kept one foot in the room. If Grandma Lou asked whether she'd stayed inside all morning, she could say yes.

“Hey, Sugar Bee.” She wore the black polyester pants, stained across her right thigh. That stain bothered Grandma Lou but Izzy didn’t care. This morning, Hattie’s blouse was bright pink. She kept to plain colors for her pants and the two skirts she wore rarely but was partial to flashy tops. The blouse was clean but misbuttoned.

Izzy pointed at the offending buttons and Hattie looked down. “Now how ever do you suppose that happened?” She grinned and unbuttoned her shirt, top to bottom.

“Miss Hattie.” Izzy giggled, pointed again, this time at a black bra, left cup torn across the middle.

Her grin widened and she flapped her arms as if the opened blouse were wings and she was ready to fly away, maybe join the sparrows chattering all in a row along the electrical wires overhead.

“Button up.” If Grandma Lou saw this, she might say Izzy was to have nothing to do with Hattie.

“Okay, okay. Nobody up here but us, Sugar Bee. Buttoning, buttoning, buttoning.” She started at the top, then looked up midway to give Gracie, working at the other end of the second floor, a big wave and a callout. When she reached the last button, she was still shy a buttonhole. “Now how ever do

you suppose that happened?” She was no more upset this second time than the first. Some days, nothing bothered Hattie. Other days, any little thing did.

“Let me.” Izzy unfastened until she reached the mistake then re-buttoned, careful not to touch the bra.

“Going for my groceries,” Hattie said, standing very still as if a soon-to-be second grader buttoning her blouse was the most expected of Monday morning events.

“You have your cart?”

“Have my cart.”

“Your list?” Last Monday, Hattie had made it all the way to Foodway before discovering she’d forgotten the list and had to backtrack. Izzy had helped her search her room and they were both surprised when the list turned up in the microwave.

Hattie unzipped a compartment of the flowered fanny pack she wore across her hips, pulled out a sheet folded into a small square and torn from a motel notepad. She unfolded the paper, shook it, and showed Izzy.

The list was longer than last week’s but included many of the same items. Hattie’s regulars: apples, bananas, Coke, bologna, chips, bread, cheese, anything but Swiss. Hattie had tried Swiss once and Swiss was no good, she’d told

Izzy. She kept that reminder—“no Swiss”—on every list in case the store tried to tempt her with an especially good sale. “You’re making sandwiches again,” Izzy said.

“How did you know?” She sounded genuinely surprised.

Izzy pointed at the sheet without suggesting Hattie should’ve figured that out on her own. Grandma Lou said when a person was being genuine—and you could always tell when a person was being genuine—you had to treat them with respect no matter what they told you. If she ever caught Izzy being disrespectful to a genuine person, Grandma Lou would do something awful. She never said what the awful might be, she left that for Izzy to figure out. A boy from Fairway had said when his daddy got after him good, his butt ended up red as a cherry for days. The boy had told the story like a brag and that had puzzled Izzy more than anything. Grandma Lou never hit her, but if she did, that would be awful. Her butt turning red as a cherry—that’s what she decided the awful would be. No need for the awful this morning because she was being respectful to a genuine person.

Hattie refolded the list, returned it to her pack, and re-zipped the compartment. “You coming?” she asked, as if the decision had been made without

consulting her. She wasn't upset about that, just wanted to know what had been decided.

"Grandma Lou wants me staying inside this morning." She tapped the floor with the foot she was keeping in their room. Yesterday, she and Mr. Patel had a friendly chat. Wasn't Grandma Lou always after her to be friendly? But today, she had to stay in their room.

"Inside?" She studied Izzy, only a small part of her inside, but must've decided that was enough to count as doing what Grandma Lou wanted because she didn't ask for more explanation.

Behind Izzy, theme music for *Family Feud* played. That was her least favorite game show. Sometimes she didn't understand the questions and often-times didn't like the answers. She also didn't like the excitable families, all of them jumping and hugging when they got anything right even when they hadn't won a thing yet. On that show, Izzy came close to agreeing with Rochelle.

"Lou is across the way." Gracie had reached the room three doors down and must've overheard them. Grandma Lou said Gracie had the best ears a person could have, and that made Izzy wish her own were better than just

ordinary. "You two watch my cart and I'll run to ask if Izzy can go to Foodway."

Both of them nodded, Izzy more vigorously than Hattie because getting her whole body out of the room and outside, walking to Foodway or anywhere at all, was what she suddenly wanted most right now.

Gracie reached the corner of the building before she turned back to them. "You want me to ask that other girl if she wants to go too?"

There was another girl around here? That's what came of too many days when Grandma Lou decided she belonged indoors. She was missing too much. She'd missed an entire girl.

"Is she nice?" Hattie asked exactly what Izzy was wondering.

"Far as I know," Gracie called back. "So, if Lou says you can go, should I ask the girl too?" She rested a hand on one hip and that meant she wanted to take off. Grandma said Gracie was a fast cleaner because she was always eager to take off, certain the next room held the biggest tip ever instead of a handful of change, a single dollar, or nothing, what the envelope on the bureau held most often.

Izzy and Hattie looked at each other. It was up to them. Did they want that new girl walking to Foodway with them? Grandma Lou might send a dollar. If that other girl was with them and if she didn't have her own money, Izzy would have to share her treat because she'd feel bad sharing only with Hattie and leaving the girl with nothing.

"What's her name?" Hattie asked. The second question Izzy was wondering.

Now a hand rested on each hip, working hard to keep her in place when all she wanted was to take off. "Mary? Marsha? Madeline?" Gracie threw names at them as if they'd know which to choose. "Yes or no? Yes or no? Yes or no?"

"Yes," Hattie said, repetition pulling an answer from her.

"Yes," Izzy said. Meeting a new girl who might become a friend was worth the price of sharing a treat. She'd get M&Ms if Grandma Lou sent a dollar because they were easiest to share and she and Hattie both liked them.

While Hattie watched Gracie's cart, Izzy went back into the room to turn off the set and unplug the coffeemaker. She was careful to pull out the right plug, leaving the fridge and microwave in their sockets. The breakfast bowls and plastic spoons she'd washed had dried on the towel laid out next to the

sink, so she returned those to the bureau where they joined other dishes. Next, she hung the dish drying towel on the bar to the left of the sink and turned off the bathroom lights. She carried the Cheerios box back to its spot on the microwave, careful not to disturb the packages of mac-and-cheese, other instant pastas, and stacked cans of beans and corn. Not a single thing fell off the microwave this time. That good luck gave her hopes of the girl being really nice and Grandma Lou sending a dollar.

“Come on out here, Izzy.” Hattie didn’t like to be left guarding Gracie’s cart alone, though Izzy couldn’t think why it needed guarding. Who’d decide to walk off with a cleaning cart?

“I’m closing down the room, but then I’m coming right out.” Those were her grandmother’s orders. Anytime she left, Izzy had to close down the room, and even though they’d been here less than a month, Izzy was already very good at that.

She took a last look around. Bed neatly made up. Her blanket folded at the foot and Maisie, her ragdoll, sitting up on pillows at the head. Her toys—a red fire engine, a set of blocks she rarely used but was happy to own, crayons and two coloring books, and a 500-piece puzzle of birds which Grandma Lou liked to put together but which belonged to Izzy—were in their corner. Next to her

toys was the floor lamp and cushioned chair, their living room chair, Grandma Lou said. Under the chair laid, Izzy's two books, not library books but her own: *The Little Engine That Could* and *The Story of Ferdinand*. She still liked reading those though she knew the stories so well, she didn't have to look at the words. That was okay because then she could concentrate on the pictures. On one page of her pink notebook, she'd tried to draw Ferdinand, but the result didn't look much like a bull so after that she decided to stick with flowers.

"You coming?" Hattie called again.

She turned off the lights, made sure her room card was safely tucked in the pocket of her shorts, and pulled the door shut.

"There you are," Hattie said as if Izzy had been gone a very long time. "Still waiting on that Gracie." She stuck a hand in her pocket, rattled the set of keys she carried everywhere and had shown Izzy when they first met.

"She'll be here soon. She had to ask Grandma Lou and then she had to find the girl." If her grandmother had refused permission, Gracie would've been back by now, Izzy and *Family Feud* stuck with each other. "Maybe the girl had to find a grown-up to get permission." As soon as she said this, she was sure it must be true. If the girl was around her age, she had to get permission for nearly everything. Here or at school or anywhere. One of these days, Izzy

wouldn't have to get permission. She'd spent time thinking on when that would happen but wasn't sure the answer she settled on, twelve, was right.

"Lou. The girl. The girl's grown-up." Hattie gave the front wheel a kick but not hard enough to rattle the cart. She wanted to be on her way. Hattie did a better job of staying in one place than Gracie, but even she had things to do, and guarding a cleaning cart wasn't on today's schedule.

Izzy tugged on the door handle, making sure it was latched, then stepped around Hattie to place both hands on the push bar. "I'll watch the cart now."

Her expression softened at being relieved of guard duty.

Gracie was taking an extra-long time. Maybe she'd had to talk Grandma Lou into agreeing to Foodway. Or maybe Grandma Lou had said yes right away and the girl was the one Gracie was working to convince. Or maybe everyone—Grandma Lou, the girl, the girl's in-charge adult—had all needed convincing. If that was the problem, who knew how long she and Hattie would be standing here? How soon before Hattie got sick of waiting and took off, leaving Izzy to guard the cleaning supplies? Then, just as she was hoping this didn't happen, Gracie rounded the corner.

"Found her," Gracie said. "She was just walking around. That's all." Hattie, Izzy, and the cart stood in front of her and that girl, only skinny legs showing,

stood behind her. "Wasn't that all you were doing, honey? Just walking around?"

"That's all," the girl said.

Izzy knew the voice. Knew it right away. The circle of girls. That girl. "Martene," she said, her voice loud with surprise.

"I thought you didn't know her," Gracie said.

"It's you," Martene said, more annoyed than Hattie had been over watching the cleaning supplies.

Of course it was her. Who else would she be?

"You ladies best be on your way," Gracie said. "Lou wants you back here by lunch."

"Well, come on then." Martene sounded as if Foodway had been her idea all along.

Gracie handed Izzy four quarters. "From Lou."

Izzy said thank you, but Gracie didn't have to tell her who sent the money. Nobody else sent her quarters. Once, Ashley had given her five dimes because she'd stared so hard when her cousins got their weekly allowances of three

dollars each. She never got money like that again because Grandma Lou forbade her from ever trying to stare money into her hands. They were guests not beggars, and she wasn't to forget that. And she hadn't.

Martene was halfway down the steps, Hattie behind but slower because of the shopping cart banging alongside her. When they returned, Izzy would lug bags of groceries up the steps. Hattie's job was to guard the food, both the food at the top of the stairs and the food still in the cart. Izzy's job was the hardest, she thought, though Hattie disagreed because her eyes had to do two jobs, switch between the bags at the top of the stairs and those at the bottom. Her eyes were always tired out after grocery shopping. Before Izzy moved in, Hattie had waited for Gracie or Mr. Patel or one of the other long timers to happen by. Once, she'd told Izzy, she'd waited an entire morning. Maybe today Martene would help. Only if she wanted. Hattie and Izzy weren't in charge of Martene, couldn't tell her what to do.

Martene led them single file down Independence Avenue, Hattie and her cart second, Izzy last, until they reached the store. Inside, Izzy grabbed a shopping cart and held it still while Hattie folded hers and slid it on the bottom rack. She fished out her list and unfolded the small square while Martene kept an eye on her.

"I'm pushing," Martene said, and stared at Izzy who dropped her hands from the bar.

"Two apples," Hattie announced, in the lead now.

After the apples were bagged and in the cart, Hattie said, "Three bananas," and led them in that direction.

"One can of tuna." Until she'd gotten every item, it was no use trying to talk with her because all she'd tell you was the next thing on her list.

The canned vegetable aisle held them up for a while. Libby's green beans, which Hattie much preferred over the store brand, were unexpectedly on sale and that drew a yip of pleasure from her. But you only got the sale price if you bought five.

"They'll keep," Martene said. "Right?"

Izzy was so surprised at being asked her opinion, she didn't answer immediately.

"Right?" Martene demanded, not as irritated as she'd been when Mrs. Pence abandoned them but heading in that direction.

"Right," Izzy said.

"Where would I put those cans?"

“Where you put the others,” Martene said as if she’d been inside Hattie’s room a dozen times when Izzy was certain she hadn’t stepped foot in there once.

“One, two,” Hattie said, then “three, four, five.” She settled the five cans next to the single can of store brand tuna. Next, they hit the bread aisle, the soda aisle, the deli aisle. When they started off again, Hattie’s speed picked up and that told Izzy they were heading to chips, Hattie’s favorite aisle. Last Monday, they’d spent nearly as much time there as in the whole rest of the store. Hattie really, really liked her chips.

She took her time making her way from one end of that aisle to the other. This first pass was to check for sales tags. If Martene thought they were now nearly done with chips, she was about to be proven wrong.

On Hattie’s second pass down the aisle, she stood the sale chips sideways on their shelves and studied her options. When every sale item had been evaluated and compared, she started her third pass, the most time consuming of all, deciding which chips should be returned to their front-facing positions and which were still in the running. Then, finally, she chose two bags to add to the grocery cart.

After Hattie's first trip down the aisle, Izzy stepped next to Martene. She kept her hands at her sides despite there being plenty of room for them on the bar. "I have four quarters," she said quietly. Money had not been on her list of ideas for getting on Martene's good side, but money was powerful and she might as well try.

"Four?"

"For candy."

"You stole four quarters," Martene declared.

She sounded so certain for a moment Izzy thought maybe she had stolen the money then remembered she'd never stolen a thing. But might she one day? Was that why Martene guessed the quarters were stolen? Was that the future she saw for her? Izzy, a thief? What would she steal first? "Grandma Lou gave them to me. For candy." She repeated that last because she thought having a specific purpose for the money might force Martene to believe her.

Martene pressed her lips together, released them with a loud smack. "You didn't steal the quarters," she said, judge and jury.

Izzy was thrilled to be found innocent. "You can help me decide what to get."

“I don’t have any money today.” She made this sound as if, on any other day, her pockets would be overflowing, coins spilling as she walked.

“I’ll share.” Izzy expected this generosity to be rewarded but instead got a frown and another lip smack.

“My mother says I’m getting fat and I’m not supposed to eat candy, not even half a Butterfinger before school starts.”

“You’re not fat.” If anything, Martene was too skinny, her knees and elbows nothing but knobs on her limbs, those arms and legs all bones.

Martene inspected herself. “No, I’m not fat,” she decided.

“Why does your mother say you’re fat?”

“She likes to say stuff.” She pushed the cart a few inches forward then back. She kept doing that, going slower and slower, until it was barely moving.

“Your grandmother likes to say stuff?”

Izzy considered. Grandma Lou talked a lot and a lot of what she said consisted of orders about how Izzy was to behave. But Grandma Lou never said Izzy was too fat or too skinny or too anything else. “She thinks I’m fine the way I am.”

Martene drew her head back in disbelief. "Nobody's fine just the way they are." She squinted at Izzy as if to uncover the flaws Grandma Lou was keeping from her.

Izzy wished Hattie would hurry and choose her chips. She didn't want to be standing here about to hear Martene call out all that was wrong with her. She looked down at her red sandals, the strap on the left foot worn to a dull brown, nothing the least bit red about it. The hem of her shorts was frayed, left more than right. Was her left side the problem, wearing out her sandal and shorts much faster than the right?

"All set," Hattie said.

"I've got candy money," she called to Hattie who'd already reached the end of the aisle.

"We almost missed the candy aisle. Now how ever do you suppose that happened?" She swung to the left, not waiting to see whether the girls followed.

"Hurry," Izzy said. "When Hattie says she's all set, she's liable to grab the last thing she wants and run to checkout."

"But I've got her groceries."

"I know. That's just how she is."

Martene, pushing the basket, considered for a moment. “Okay,” she said. “That’s just how she is.”

In the candy aisle—no sale tags—Hattie tossed her favorites, miniature Almond Joys, into the cart then headed straight for the turntable of individual candies at the end of the aisle offering all the choices a dollar let you buy. Izzy never had enough money for more than that.

Butterfingers weren’t Izzy’s first choice, but the package of bite-sized fingers was what she grabbed this morning.

“I’m not fat,” Martene said and slid her hands to one side of the bar, making room for Izzy’s. Together they pushed the grocery-filled cart down the aisle, several steps behind Hattie, taking care to keep her in sight.

JACQUELINE GUIDRY’s work has appeared in *Carve*, *Nimrod*, *Orca*, and elsewhere, and is slated for the *Arlington Literary Journal* (ArLiJo), *Chaffin Journal*, and *South Carolina Review*. She has received five Pushcart nominations, Yemassee’s Fiction Award, and descant’s Gary Wilson Short Fiction award. Her novel, *The Year the Colored Sisters Came to Town* (Welcome Rain), was selected for the Pen/Faulkner Writers in Schools program, and was the community read in Kansas City, Missouri and Windsor, Connecticut.