

Excerpt from *Hand-Me-Downs*

August, 1975

A breeze blows through the rolled-down car windows as we ride along the highway from the beach in Daddy's station wagon. My parents, my best friend Terri, and I just spent a week at Nags Head—a vacation before eighth grade starts. Terri and I have grown apart some in junior high the past two years, so it was good to spend some time together the way we used to. We went swimming in the hotel pool every day and took the raft into the ocean a few times. She looks a lot better in a two-piece bathing suit than I do. I think it's mainly because her boobs are bigger and her stomach is flatter. Yeah, I guess that would pretty much do it.

As Terri naps, I glance out the window, marveling over how far away from home I feel because the land looks so different. In between Rocky Mount and the Outer Banks, there is not a lot in Eastern North Carolina except lonely two-lane roads, miles of flat tobacco fields, and the occasional little general store on the side of the road. Driving these roads makes me feel like I'm somehow detached from the rest of the world, floating, meaningless. Driving through small towns that have just a stoplight or two makes me feel like I'm suffocating, cut off from everything. But I feel that way only during the day; that same small town seems peaceful and quaint when I pass through them at night, like Mayberry. Still, I'm always relieved when we get to a city again.

I take out a composition book and scribble down my list of things to do. 1. Buy notebook paper and pencils for school. 2. Shave legs. 3. p.t. For weeks now I've written the initials "p.t." on my list. "P.T." stands for "practice Tampax". I use the initials so nobody will

know what I'm talking about if they should happen to see my list. I'm tired of having to use those bulky-as-hell pads, but I don't know if I'll ever learn how to put a tampon in. Not the kind of thing they give lessons for. I don't even want to ask my sisters how to do it. I've tried putting one in a few times, but it stops about halfway up, and I don't push it any farther because I'm afraid it'll get lost somewhere up there. How embarrassing to be rushed to the emergency room because of a lost Tampax.

It's not fair that boys don't have to worry much when they go through puberty. They get deeper voices and muscles, while we bleed to death and have bad cramps and are scared to wear white pants or go swimming or to gym class. How could that possibly be an even trade-off? They don't call it 'the curse' for nothing. Terri snorts in her sleep and smacks her lips a little before she quiets down again. I stifle a giggle and wonder what she's dreaming about. Some guy probably. Terri and I are still good friends, but we haven't shared things and talked as openly as we used to. I still haven't told her that I started my period two months ago. She started hers a whole year ago -- probably a pro with tampons.

We drop Terri off at her house and then drive home. As we pull in our driveway, I see a red Mustang parked under the basketball goal nearby. The mustang is my brother-in-law Mark's prize possession, a gift his rich uncle bought him when he started law school.

Mark's been married to my sister Laura for almost four years, and he's so much fun. "The life of the party" I heard my aunt say once. A few months ago, he even tried to teach that new dance called The Hustle to my Daddy, and they had everybody cracking up. He could make anybody laugh by doing his Richard Nixon or Donald Duck impression.

"Good," I think, "Laura and Mark are here." I roll down the window to yell at them, but then I notice Renee standing on the sidewalk in her bathing suit, her arms folded in front of her.

She looks madder than hell. Her radio is on top of her lawn chair and towel, playing away although nobody is listening. Some song by Chicago.

Then I see Mark and Laura sitting in the middle of the yard on the grass. Laura is crying with her knees pulled up to her chest, rocking back and forth. Mark's squatting beside her, staring straight ahead with no expression on his face at all. They look like actors caught in mid-scene of a play. Daddy parks the station wagon, shouting, "What in the world is going on?" Mama jumps out of the car and makes a beeline toward Laura. Daddy and I get out, too. I smell that wonderful fresh-cut grass smell and know the neighbor boy from down the street must have mowed the lawn not too long ago.

Laura looks up at us and sobs, "Oh, Mama." Mama hugs her while she cries.

Daddy asks Mark what's the matter. Mark stands up, slowly shaking his head, looking down at his shoes. Laura manages to say between sobs, "Mark wants a divorce."

Mama gasps and mumbles "Oh, no," while Daddy swerves around real quick and looks at Mark.

It's hard to breathe. For an unreal second, I wonder if we might be on "Candid Camera". Mid-afternoon on a Sunday in August. A perfectly normal, routine day and suddenly everything shatters.

Renee says without taking her eyes off Mark, "He told her in the car on their way home from eating at Hardee's. Laura was real upset so he decided to stop by here to see if we could calm her down." Her voice is like steel -- cold and hard. It scares me.

Mark sighs, rubs his forehead like he's got a headache. "I didn't mean for it to happen like this. She was talking about having a family and—" His voice trails off. "I told her I wasn't happy. I've been thinking about telling her this for a long time."

"So you tell her in the car of all places?" Renee asks, her eyes spewing fire and looking dead at the same time.

"It just happened, Renee," Mark says, sounding really tired. "She was talking about having a family, and I had to tell her how I feel."

Mama, all the while hugging Laura, softly asks him, "Is there somebody else?"

Mark's mouth quivers a little. "No, nothing like that. It's just -- it's just me."

I gasp, but not much sound comes out. Jill had told us all about the 'it's me, not you' line. He looks away from Mama, at the ground. "I don't want to be married any more. I feel trapped," Mark says.

Hearing this, Laura sobs harder and screams at him, "How can you say that to me?" Daddy goes over and stoops down beside Laura and Mama. He pats Laura on the back, looking awkward and not at all sure of what he should do next. Cars pass by on the road in front of our house, their passengers not aware of the awful scene taking place.

Suddenly I wish I were in one of those cars, whizzing by and not recognizing a single soul in our yard, not feeling the pain we feel. But this is my family, and for the first time in my life I wonder how we're going to get through something, how life will go on. Through the screen door, I hear the telephone ringing, but nobody makes a move to answer it. Nobody, including me, even acts like they hear it. After about five rings, it stops.

A cardinal lands in the birdbath in the middle of the yard and then just as quickly, it's gone, almost as if it took one look around and decided it didn't want to be a part of this. I watch

him soar into the sky until he's a red dot among the huge oak trees.

Renee starts toward the house, looking pissed, but then she stops and glares at Mark, just a foot or so from his face. "You're such a bastard," she says coldly.

Mark's face falls as if his feelings are really hurt. "Is that what I am to you?"

"To me, that's exactly what you are," Renee retorts, speaking slowly, spacing her words apart so that each one sinks in. She turns to go into the house and leaves Mark standing there as if he's been slapped in the face. I've never heard anyone in my family say 'bastard' out loud like that, and it feels strange. The word echoes in my head like a 45 speed record that's stuck on one line. The word gets louder and louder inside my head until I feel as if my head will explode. Renee just said 'bastard' and nobody even seems to care, as if she said, "Pass the salt." Sure, I overhear my sisters say words like 'shit' and 'damn', but they don't say anything stronger.

Then Mark looks at Daddy. "I'm sorry Rooster," he apologizes, calling Daddy by the nickname Mark gave him when he started teasing Daddy about being henpecked. The word 'Rooster', catches in his throat like he's choking on it.

Daddy shakes his head, then looks away, his eyes filling with tears. "Don't call me that anymore," he mumbles. It's the first time I've ever seen my Daddy cry. My own eyes start to water. "Don't call me that," he says again. Mark puts his hands in his pockets and leans back against the oak tree by the driveway, biting his lower lip. His jaw seems to tighten, clenching and unclenching, as he stares at the maze of roots at the bottom of the tree. The strong roots look tangled or maybe intertwined, I'm not sure which. I want to go up and hug Mark and tell him things will be all right, that we still love him. But I stand paralyzed instead, somehow knowing I'm supposed to stand in support of my family, even though I thought Mark was a part of my family. I half expect him to turn around and grin and say it's all just a joke.

Then Mark begins walking slowly across the yard, toward his car. "Maybe I should leave for a while," he says so low I can hardly hear him. Part of me wants to scream at him and the other part wants to go hug him good-bye. I don't do either. He walks past the basketball goal, the birdbath, a patch of dandelions — the ones I blow into the air to watch the fuzzy white flowers float away, never knowing in which direction they will go.

We all watch silently as Mark gets into his Mustang and backs out the driveway, gravel crunching under the tires. As he drives away, his wavy blond hair blows in the wind just as it did the times he drove me home from school or to Tastee Freeze. After he's gone no one says a word. And the only sound -- except for the lulling hum of a small airplane in the clouds -- is the sound of Laura crying.
