

## The Dress

The summer of 1992 chugged along like it always did, the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke churning in thick circles in our house, the sound of bullfrogs and crickets screaming us to sleep every night. Every day that summer, me and Johnny and Austin swam at the same YMCA and did the same weed-picking and clothes-hanging for Miss Annie next door. And every night, Johnny and I sat on the porch and watched the same flock of screeching Yellowhammers fly over the ditch in our backyard at sunset. And that summer, for some reason, I dreamed the same dream. I dreamed those Yellowhammers just one day picked up and flew far, far away, never coming back to Alabama, never coming back near our creaky house again.

The end of August meant two things for me in the summer of '92, I started my first year at Jackson High, and it also meant it was finally my fourteenth birthday.

Mama tried to make a huge deal out of our birthdays. She would announce it every year in the County Newsletter, inviting every neighbor in an eight-mile radius, stretching from the rickety old shacks on the edge of Chutney's Creek to the rolling hills of mansions of rich folks near the high schools. That summer, she told me to invite my friends, too. "Carolina, baby, you invite all your little friends from school, and I promise I'll clean the house up real nice. We'll even rent a horse for ya'll to ride, baby," this year's pledge sounding even less convincing than in past years. I told her I would. And of course, I didn't.

Surprisingly, though, that summer had treated Mama well. Jim, the air conditioning man, was staying over with us a lot, practically living in our tiny, russet-stained home. I still hated him more than I hate seeing dead animals lying wide-eyed on the side of the highway, but he didn't say too much, so he was tolerable for the time being. I was getting really good at ignoring the dim-witted, over-exhaustive breathing noises he made at me constantly, too. Plus, he was getting good at silencing Mama when he screwed her multiple times every

night in the room next door to mine, which was a better effort than any other male guest we'd had in the two years or so had put out. Every night, instead of the previous reckless abandon and throat-curdling screaming and pounding, it was now "Uhhh . . . uhhh . . . oh yeah, Lynette . . . uhhmmm . . . yea . . . wait . . . wait . . . your girl's gonna hear us," echoing from her room to mine. I was so very impressed by his courteousness.

Mr. Oh-So-Courteous had been better at winning over my brothers, too. He fixed up Austin's bike so he could ride it to kindergarten, even fixing it up with those colored spokes, so Austin began worshipping him. I found it to be a very clever move on Jim's part—bait the baby and the others will soon follow.

Johnny let Jim take him fishing for bass near the creek, and Mama told Johnny when she started making some money she'd get it stuffed up real nice for him so he could hang it on the living room wall. He was happy as a pig in shit.

Mama had started the accelerated program at Jillian's House of Cosmetology and was about to graduate with her degree in what she called "hair-fixing." She practiced on me a lot, and I had nice white streaks put in my already flaxen hair the night before my birthday. The streaks made my eyes seem even greener than the mold that grew on the corner of our house, which I actually thought was a very flattering color.

"You look like a young Farrah Fawcett, Carolina," Mama cooed at me proudly. "You're gonna look just so grown up for everyone at your party, tomorrow, baby." I noticed Jim's beady eyes pounce on me from the TV room a little too adoringly. My stomach churned, and I quickly cursed him under my breath, suddenly hating the new chemical addition to my hair. I muttered a goodnight and retreated quickly to my room for my last night as a thirteen-year-old.

I woke up the morning of my birthday to my Mama's singing.

"Laaaaaaaaadeeeeeedaaaaaa . . . laaaaa laaaaaa deeeee daaaa," she droned loudly as she clinked around with spoons in the kitchen, working on my token birthday apple pie. Mama was funny like that; she had a real nice voice, almost like a canary's, but she only sang when she was cooking. I checked my boobs in the mirror to see if they had grown with my new age. To my disappointment, though, I saw nothing spectacular. I stuck my tongue out at my reflection and walked out to the kitchen.

Mama pinched my bottom, sending chills down my unusually achy spine. "Look at my oldest girl!" she proclaimed, her parched blonde hair flailing around her head in a wild halo as she danced about. "My only girl! Fourteen! I can't believe it!" Her eyes looked abnormally red for ten in the morning, but I shrugged it off and glanced past her to the little pink box perched on the kitchen table. I was relieved to see that Jim was already gone for work.

Mama followed my gaze and looked almost giddy with excitement. "Open it, honey," she suddenly coaxed. "It's the best one yet." Johnny and Austin

inquisitively gazed up at me from behind their cereal box castles they made almost every morning, wanting me to open it, too.

“Mama let me help pick it out, Carolina! Open!” Austin exclaimed, pointing at the box as if it were an African lion, just raring to rumble out. “Open it now!”

I smiled and tore through the shiny crimson paper, tossing it aside quickly. I opened the box, and found something I had discovered in various colored boxes for thirteen years before that day. My birthday dress. My little tradition. This one was in fact a beauty, and I could tell from the tag that it was from Betty’s Sweetheart Consignments, me and Mama’s favorite store. The white cotton dress was shorter than I had gotten in past years, and it scooped daringly in the front. A delicate lace overlay covered the crocheted bust and flowed in fragile swirls to the edge of the material. “Mama, it’s beautiful,” I gasped, really meaning it. I was astounded with my first grown-up-looking piece of clothing. It was so beautiful, so white, that I wanted to save it for my wedding. Mama, however, had other, more immediate plans for it. “You’re gonna have all the boys droolin’ in that little number, sugar. Just you wait and see.”

Just like every other recent birthday it was me, Mama, Johnny, Austin, and whichever man was around at the time, this year the lucky one being Jim, who, with the smell of Freon prevailing his entrance, rolled up in his air conditioning truck just minutes before my birthday breakfast.

“You thank him for leavin’ work early just for your birthday,” Mama ordered when she saw me scowl at Jim’s entrance.

“Thank you, sir,” I smiled, wanting with every inch of my being to slap him.

There was no mention made of the friends that never showed up (I never invited them) and no appearance of a birthday horse to ride (Mama apparently never ordered one). Instead, the five of us sat around the table with a box of runny, melted vanilla ice cream from Collins’ Convenience and Mama’s apple pie for breakfast. I got cards from Grandma and Pop-pop in Delaware, and Johnny and Austin had gone in to buy me a pack of new playing cards, which I knew were also for their own benefit, too, the endearing little heathens.

At Mama’s request, I tried on my new dress. It fit perfectly, the bright lace accentuating my summer tan and the stretchy cotton bringing rather grown-up curves I was delighted to see into light. I felt sexy, and I wanted to wear it forever. I kept it on even when we went outside after breakfast, promising to be careful with it on.

We spent the rest of the light hours in the yard, Jim, Johnny, Austin and I playing numerous games of kickball, Alabama’s summer sun beaming down on the top of our heads. Whenever I ran, I held the corners of the dress to my sides, and I made sure not to make any slides into bases. Jim played pinch hitter, slipping and falling on his big stupid knees at least seven times, much

to my delight. Mama sat with her bottomless Bloody Mary on the front porch, her feet soaking in a shallow blue kiddie pool she had bought with one of her first tips fixing hair, screaming out at me all day not to rip my dress as I ran the makeshift bases over and over again.

Dusk crept in finally, the mosquitoes starting their battle against our skin, and we went inside to avoid them. Mama put the boys to bed, not bothering to peel them from their dusty clothes. Jim felt the need to comment. “You always let them go to bad all *nasty* like that?” I heard him grumble, apparently more than a little pissed off that I had beat him in home runs. I wondered since when he had the right to talk about parenting, but then again, it was about that time that Mama started letting him take over. I glanced out to the back yard from the window, deciding I was going to creep out for a little time alone.

I still had my dress on, and I wanted to have one last excursion before I had to take it off. I popped my head out onto the front porch where Mama was babbling off something to Jim and told her I was going for a quick walk in the back. “Mhmmm, baby, whatever you want, birthday girl,” she replied, her eyes intoxicatingly glued on Dipety-Doo.

I scurried off into the back before she could change her mind. I was ready to make a good find, and it meant a lot to me that night that I find something, since I was an adult now, after all. I felt like a woman in my dress, and I damn well was one now, as far as I was concerned. And so I went. Ever since I had found a tattered old Bible in the backyard a year or so before, I had been finding small treasures all over the place in the woods behind our house. The woods were large enough for to explore for about an hour, and it seemed like every time I thought I had found all I could—the Bible, a feather pen, an empty bottle of Old Spice, a rusty silver chain, a couple of muddy tennis shoes—I found something new. The findings were few and far between, but they came like clockwork on the days I really wanted to find them, like that night. Johnny was the only person I had told about my findings, and he told me it was probably some homeless man’s stuff. I thought otherwise. For the past year, I had had dreams there was a gallant man living out in our woods, a restless, daring cowboy gifting me with his belongings until I was old enough for him to come formally introduce himself. I didn’t tell Johnny about that part, of course. It was when I found something from my cowboy, though, that I had these fantasies, and the night of my fourteenth birthday, walking in my beautiful white gown, I wanted nothing more than to find something from him.

After a good forty minutes of pacing through the woods, I saw it. It was right there on the edge of the Williams property that backed up into our land on the furthestmost right corner of the woods. It was just what I needed, too, and I silently thanked my cowboy for leaving it for me. He always knew what to get me. It was a small silver stopwatch, glimmering brightly from the reflection of the moon from under a huge willow branch. The clock wasn’t ticking, but I

could tell from the smoothness of the metal it had been used for a long, long time. I imagined it pressed upon the cowboy's chest, ticking next to his heart as he went about his daily life. I almost felt guilty stooping down to pick it up and planning to keep it for my own, as I always did with his things, but then I reminded myself that he had left it just for me. I crouched to the soft dirt ground, cradling the stopwatch, forgetting momentarily about the white dress that cascaded around my legs to the ground. I thought about my Mama then, probably screwing the hell out of Jim at that very instant, and I suddenly didn't care about the dress.

I lay completely on the ground, the stopwatch clenched in my left hand, and I closed my eyes tight. I imagined my cowboy then, his face a blur but still very familiar. I slid my right hand under my now dirty dress, and then I saw him very clearly. He was tall, taller than Mama, taller than Jim. He was dark in every way—his eyes, his skin, his hair, his voice. He wore a dark hat that he took off in my presence . . . a fully-bloomed woman's presence. I imagined him there with me, lying on the soft earth's floor. He complimented my dress, and his sweet voice beckoned me like it always did. He asked me to leave with him, to leave Alabama forever to live by his side. "I love you Carolina," he said, his dark eyes pressed into my mind. "You never have to worry about a thing with me." I almost heard him sigh as I envisioned his rough hands wrap around me, his strong biceps clenched and glistening under the sun. He pulled me to the back of his stallion, and we galloped away . . . away from that house . . . away from Alabama forever. I felt my hand become his beneath me, and he felt me slowly and deeply, over and over again. With that, I fell back into myself, feeling my back arch slightly as a familiar sensation tingled from my ears to my toes and back up again, shaking me. I quickly got up, feeling guilty suddenly, feeling as dirty as the dress that was now covered with soil. I frantically tried to scrub away the mud, but I knew it was too late. I ran back toward the house, the stopwatch still clenched in my hand, wondering how long I had been gone.

I thought I could sneak through the side door to avoid Mama and Jim, but it just couldn't have been that easy—not in that house. Mama and Jim sat right there as I busted in, both sipping on their evening golden nectar. It was apparent from the castle of Milwaukee's Best cans on the counter that it wasn't their first. I stepped into their view, feeling my body tense with anticipation. Mama took one look at me, her eyes fluttering over the dirt stains all over my dress. Her newly lit cigarette fell from her mouth to the floor as she opened her mouth wide to speak—but Jim chimed in before she could utter a word.

"You ungrateful little bitch!": he yelped, chucking his beer can down as rose from his chair. He threw his arm in front of Mama as if to say, *I'll take care of this*. The thing is, though, is that while I knew Mama was mad, she wasn't quite in the state Jim seemed to be in. It was a dress, it could be fixed. I knew that. Mama knew that. But Jim didn't.

“Your Mama spent a whole week’s tips on that damned ugly piece of shit!” He veered toward me with pink eyes, his breath hot with the smell of alcohol, and he stumbled to the side from the suddenness of the moved. He charged forward, swinging a clenched fist toward my chest. I ducked swiftly, feeling only the whoosh of air in front of me, and I ran toward my room, not looking back. I slammed the door behind me, sobbing, my body shaking from his reaction. I crawled underneath my covers, waiting for the worst.

“Lynette, it’s one thing to let your goddamn sons go to bed dirty, but dammit, they’re boys!” Jim screamed from the kitchen. “I won’t have none of that in my house, though! Dirty little bitch! Put her on restriction, right fucking now, and tell her you ain’t fixing that dress!”

*His house?*

As I laid there, sobbing at myself, I could see the drunken thoughts scurry through Mama’s mind. *Disagree, and that’s another man out the door.* I knew what would come next before she even did, but for once I wished I could be wrong. I wasn’t, though, and my premonition was confirmed as I heard Mama pounce down the hall and bang her hand against my door. “Carolina Ann!” she started. “I . . . I can’t believe your actions, tonight, young lady! You are restricted for . . . for as long as Jim and I say . . . and don’t plan on me fixin’ that dress for you!” I could still hear Jim muttering to himself in the kitchen, something about bitches and nonsense. My eyes welled up with more fat tears than I thought they could handle, and I began to swallow them as I gasped for air beneath my comforter.

*Stupid asshole Jim . . . stupid me . . . Why did I mess my dress up like that?* I thought. *Stupid cowboy . . . stupid fake cowboy . . . So much for my wonderful fourteenth birthday. So much . . .* suddenly, my thoughts were cut short when I heard Mama lean her weight against my door with a soft creak.

She placed her hand to my door. I held my breath to keep from crying, and I sat for what seemed like hours, waiting for the voice.

Then it came, just as it always did, and I just barely heard her soft whisper, “I’m so sorry, baby. I had to do it . . . Carolina, please forgive me . . . Lord . . . good

Lord . . . please, please forgive me.”