

The Secret Life of Bees – Chapter 1, pages 12- 15

My mother's name was Deborah. I thought that was the prettiest name I'd ever heard, even though T. Ray refused to speak it. If I said it, he acted like he might go straight to the kitchen and stab something. Once when I asked him when her birthday was and what cake icing she preferred, he told me to shut up, and when I asked him a second time, he picked up a jar of blackberry jelly and threw it against the kitchen cabinet. We have blue stains to this day.

I did manage to get a few scraps of information from him, though, such as my mother was buried in Virginia where he people came from. I got worked up at that, thinking I'd found a grandmother. No, he tells me, my mother was an only child whose mother died ages ago. Naturally. Once when he stepped on a roach in the kitchen, he told me my mother had spent hours luring roaches out of the house with bits of marshmallow and trails of graham-cracker crumbs, that she was a lunatic when it came to saving bugs.

The oddest things caused me to miss her. Like training bras. Who was I going to ask about that? And who but my mother could've understood the magnitude of driving me to junior cheerleader tryouts? I can tell you for certain T. Ray didn't grasp it. But you know when I missed her the most? The day I was twelve and woke up with the rose-petal stain on my panties. I was so proud of that flower and didn't have a soul to show it to except Rosaleen.

Not too long after that I found a paper bag in the attic stapled at the top. Inside it I found the last traces of my mother.

There was a photograph of a woman smirking in front of an old car, wearing a light-colored dress with padded shoulders. Her expression said, "Don't you dare take this picture," but she wanted it taken, you could see that. You could not believe the stories I saw in that picture, how she was waiting at the car fender for love to come to her, and not too patiently.

I laid the photograph beside my eighth-grade picture and examined every possible similarity. She was more or less missing a chin, too, but even so, she was above-average pretty, which offered me genuine hope for my future.

The bag contained a pair of white cotton gloves stained the color of age. When I pulled them out, I thought, *Her very hands were inside here*. I feel foolish about it now, but one time I stuffed the gloves with cotton balls and held them through the night.

The end-all mystery inside the bag was a small wooden picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I recognized her even though her skin was black, only a shade light than Rosaleen's. It looked to me like somebody had cut the black Mary's picture from a book, glued it into a sanded piece of wood about two inches across, and varnished it. On the back an unknown hand had written "Tiburon, S.C."

For two years now I'd kept these things of hers inside a tin box, buried in the orchard. There was a special place out there in the long tunnel of trees no one knew about, not even Rosaleen. I'd started going there before I could tie my shoelaces. At first it was just a spot to hide from T Ray and his meanness or from the memory of that afternoon when the gun went off, but later I would slip out there, sometimes after T. Ray had gone to bed, just to lie under the trees and be peaceful. It was my plot of earth, my cubbyhole.

I'd placed her things inside the tin box and buried it out there late one night by flashlight, too scared to leave them hanging around in my room, even in the back of a draw. I was afraid T. Ray might go up to the attic and discover her things were missing, and turn my room upside down searching for them. I hated to think what he'd do to me if he found them hidden among my stuff.

Now and then I'd go out there and dig up the box. I would lie on the ground with the trees folded over me, wearing her gloves, smiling at the photograph. I would study "Tiburon, S.C." on the back of the black Mary picture, the funny slant of the lettering, and wonder what sort of place it was. I'd look it up on the map once, and it wasn't more than two hours away. Had my mother been there and bought this picture? I always promised myself on day, when I was grown-up enough, I would take the bus over there. I wanted to go every place she had ever been.