

## Quinn

I was tiny, smaller than most baby boys. Because my mother was a crack addict, I lay in an incubator, taken care of mostly by nurses. Mom took off before I had a birthday, I cannot recall a single thing about that year. I mean, who can, right? I ended up in a program for kids without parents: Wolford Foster Home.

Oh yeah, I never met my dad either. Didn't even know what that was.

When I was four, a family adopted me. The Carrolls had a mom and dad, and there was an older brother, Quinn. He was shy, and loved books. His ears stuck out at a funny angle, he looked like an elf. His jet black hair reminded me of a wet coat on a Labrador retriever. We shared a room, and I used to watch him sleep, or pretend to. I'd never really had any stuff before, and Quinn was not happy about sharing. Who could blame him, even though I did? At a yard sale, Mr. Carroll bought a yellow blanket for me. I carried that thing everywhere until it became tattered, brown and literally fell apart.

Quinn was in first grade, so I had Mrs. Carroll all to myself that fall. She was very busy, and as the day progressed, she just seemed busier. I played outside mostly, but I wasn't allowed to cross busy Pembroke Road. At the other end of our street there was a huge field, bordered by railroad tracks on one side, and thick woods on the other. Near the tracks I'd chase grasshoppers or butterflies. Sometimes I'd sit and watch trains zoom by. They carried all sorts of interesting things: cars, cows and pigs, people and furniture. I would try to guess the color of the next train, and what it might be transporting. I'd wave to the caboose person, imagine it was me moving that fast across the landscape, catching up to my real momma.

Quinn and I never really hit it off, but for all of his huffiness, he only tried to strangle me once. And I could be mean, calling him Queenie, or making fun of how much of a queer he was. It seemed he only got stranger by the day.

He was the best jump-roper on the entire block, and knew all those rhymes by heart: *Cinderella, dressed in yellow, went upstairs to kiss her fellow*. Once, I accidentally walked in on him in the bathroom. He wore Mrs. Carroll's fall, a thick, russet brown, fake hair add-on that came down to his waist. Normally it was stored in a circular box in her closet. We never spoke about it, though that image stayed with me longer than it ought have.

Quinn would often say the only reason his parents took me in was for the money they received from the state. Although I knew this was crap, each time made me more upset. I'd tell him, we'll see who has the last laugh. Out of earshot from his parents, he'd ridicule me, call me random names before I even knew their meanings. I acted as if they didn't hurt me, *sticks and stones*, and all that. But they did.

During our teens, I became the son that the Carrolls wanted. I was the straight A jock, the class president, and became an early and constant member of Honor Society. And I was all the more popular with the Carrolls because Quinn was always in trouble. By ninth grade, his first detention was for selling speed on campus. Two weeks later, he was expelled for fighting on school grounds. He claimed he was only defending himself, and I believed him. I saw how much he was picked on.

Eventually Mr. Carroll sent him to a military school near Roxberry. Quinn ran away after three days.

There were rumors he'd been spotted on the streets of New York City.

I wondered: did he ever run into my mother?

The year I turned fifteen, my biological father called from Chicago. Said some kind of malarkey like how hard it had been to track me down. How he was gonna send money for me to come visit. How difficult life was, full of pitfalls. I never spoke to him again.

Quinn didn't keep in touch either. I heard, years later through a neighbor, that Quinn was living in New York with some other boy. Probably his lover. I knew all about his adult magazines hidden under his mattress, the soiled towels, his covert life. I tried to leave signs, hints, stopping short of just telling them. I was afraid they would believe Quinn's lies and send me back to Woford. And slowly I realized that the Carrolls knew but pretended they didn't. You know what I mean.

So, I didn't tell anyone about Quinn; hell, I figured it wasn't my business. That was all God's doing, and he certainly wasn't going to change anytime soon. Plus, the Carrolls were good to me. They were decent people, and I loved them, in my own way. But I'm not even certain what that means.

I'd moved away for college, but sent my address when I'd settled in Redondo Beach. When I turned twenty-one, I received a huge check in the mail from the Carroll's estate. Shocked, I called to say thanks, but found they'd both died in a boating accident. I tried to track down Quinn, but he'd died, too, that same spring, from "massive complications." I could only guess. I decided to send half the money to Woford Foster Home. After all, would I be alive without them?

I tried crack just once to see what it was my mother liked more than me.

It made me throw up, and that's probably a good thing.