

But Not For Me

by Katrina Gray

Annie sits in her booster seat in the back of Miss Whalen's car, her hands sticky with grape jelly. There's a song on the radio she remembers. Her dress is ironed and new, yellow with lace, uncomfortable. Miss Whalen says it's a special day. Annie wants to take off her shoes, but she keeps them on.

These trees are different—tall and broad. Annie doesn't know where she's going. They've been in the car a long time, and Annie has to pee. She doesn't know Miss Whalen well enough to say “pee” to her face, so she holds it.

Annie is quiet. Miss Whalen talks about the sky, her hair, the heat. Annie sometimes nods or shakes her head, but Miss Whalen only sees when she glances in the rearview mirror, which she does a lot.

“You like dogs, Annie?” Miss Whalen asks.

Annie nods, though she can't remember meeting a dog.

“Good,” Miss Whalen says. “The Millers have a dog. They like dogs and children, but they don't have any children, not yet.”

Miss Whalen drives Annie places where she stays, but not for keeps. So when they shake a finger, when they yell, she remembers Miss Whalen saying, “It's not for keeps.” People wait for them in houses, apartments, parks. They grab Annie's hand and talk with Miss Whalen, who pinches her cheeks and tells her to be good.

Annie tries hard to be good. She knows how to use a toilet now. She stays quiet.

Miss Whalen turns onto a street where flowering bushes line the sidewalks. The houses look the same but are different colors, and the grass is green and short. A man walking a dog waves. Boys riding bikes stop and watch the car go by. One of them locks eyes with Annie and smiles.

The car slows down, and Miss Whalen pulls into a driveway. A lady with blond hair like Annie's stands on the porch with her hand to her mouth, overcome. A man in a tie comforts her, squeezes her close, and smiles.

Miss Whalen gets out and leaves her door open. "Hi, Bob. Hey, Teri." She motions toward the back seat. "Here she is."

She unbuckles Annie and crouches as she walks her to the porch. The woman kneels to meet Annie's eyes. "Hi," she says, hushed, like she's talking to a baby. She strokes Annie's hair.

Annie feels happy. She looks up and squints when the sun catches her eyes. She sees a cloud shaped like a fish and wants to show someone.

The woman picks up Annie and laughs. She hugs Annie tight. Miss Whalen stands back, proud.

Annie can't hold it any longer. She lets go. Her tights become warm and wet, soaking the woman's blouse. The woman's face goes limp, and Annie knows she has done something else wrong.

