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Excerpt from *Call It Madness*, a novel

Summer 1976  
Interstate 95, North

He drove with the pickup windows half-down. The wind hurried in as if searching for something. Penny sat crosslegged, fingering her dress's patchwork squares. Turquoise with gold swans. Red and black stripes in varying width. A chunk of white. A single pocket of a gingerbread woman on a red background was sewn in the dress's center, big enough for her clenched hands.

She refused to change clothes.

Grownup women she knew and didn't know kept offering, "Honey, let's find you something fresh and clean."

The old man in suspenders who said he was her grandfather, her Opa, told them, "Let the child be."

She scuttled under the beautyberries, escaped.

Opa crawled under the bushes, too, and sat with her in the dirt. "Your Grandma Erna sent me. She stayed on the farm to feed the chickens and milk Lupine. We have only the one cow left." His beard snagged on a leafy branch. He unwound his beard bit by bit, a twisted white tuft remaining on the branch, hung in the piercing Florida sunlight like a cobweb.

He had a hand that was not-a-hand, a folded up flipper, not human. A fearsome thing.

As he drove, pavement flashed by the window. They passed fields so enormous it seemed impossible to ever walk through them. The truck rolled over bridges that spanned rivers with boats, the water flowing to faraway places. In her breath's fog on the glass, Penny drew two walls and a peaked roof, a door and two upstairs windows, a cat with a corkscrew tail beneath a tree that grew taller than her patch of fog, so she

exhaled, again, against the window, expanding her palette. She sucked a drop of condensation from her finger. Her skin tasted like a grubby apple slice.

The sky stretched, broken by jagged cityscapes. Rivers, half-moon iron bridges, mystifying mile markers. Everything was nameless. The daylight gave way to darkness and glowing cities. She woke in the night, and still he was driving. The pickup had no radio.

In preschool, Miss Morin played the piano. They sang songs whose words Penny didn't know except for Free to be me and you. They sang these words over and over, her teacher's favorite song, as if there were no other words. Penny didn't like this Miss Morin who made Penny go in the bathroom and wash her face every morning and do something about those ears. What was she supposed to do? Remove her ears? Wasn't Penny free to be her own me?

In her window's foggy picture, she sketched a nest in the tree's branches, four open baby birds' beaks.

They drove among endless cars and long trucks and moving vans. A train followed the highway until the tracks turned elsewhere. The moon hung in the pale pink sky, out of place. It was supposed to rise over Pike's Park where they sometimes brought sandwiches for dinner and ate at the picnic tables, silver aluminum, hot from the sun.

They stopped at a restaurant, where Opa drank coffee. He said they should order pieces of pie. The pies sat on the diner counter under smeared glass covers. Cherry bled red like spilled blood through the crust. She would never, ever eat that. Instead, she tore tiny pieces from the corner of a paper napkin, pushed them into a pile with her fingertips.

The waitress refilled her grandfather's cup and patted Penny's head.

On stools at the counter, truckers chewed toothpicks, talked trucker talk.

Opa folded bills beneath his drained cup. On their way out, he stopped at the row of candy machines. "You like gum?"

"Mom says no gum. Gets stuck in my hair."

One knee of his jeans had a hole the size of a penny. The material hung loosely, and she couldn't see his skin. He slid a coin in the machine, cranked the knob, and then opened the hatch at the bottom. Gumballs rolled into his scary hand, the fingers chopped off, the palm twisted. Carefully, without touching him, she took

the sweets — one, two, three, of course she could count, she was no baby. He studied the row of glassed-in colored treats and dropped coins into another machine. This time, a plastic egg rolled into his hand. She took that, too. She was no dummy, her mother said.

She held the egg in one hand, candy in the other.

They stepped out into the glaring afternoon. The light fell hard, like a thing.

The truck already smelled familiar, suffused with the tangy hay chaff sprinkled over the seats and gathered in clumped lines on the floor. She placed the gumballs on her dress spread over her crossed legs and opened the egg. A disc, about the thickness of a pencil eraser, fell into her lap. The circle had a plastic cover over a paper picture of a boy on a blue tricycle. Tiny holes were punched on each of the tricycle's handlebars and over the boy's overall bib. Three silver balls rolled in the disc. Penny tipped the disc, trying to cajole the beads to find their homes and remain fixed.

Her grandfather drove onto the interstate.

A bead rolled into one handlebar and then escaped. An impossible, maddening puzzle. Penny leaned her forehead against the half-rolled window, the breeze mucking with her hair. When she woke, her eyes smeary with dreams and sleep crumbles, the gumdrops had melted in her fist. The tips of her long hair were stuck to the runny gumball mess in her hand, just as her mother had warned, the gingerbread woman smeared faceless with green sugar.

Her grandfather hung one hand loosely over the steering wheel, staring ahead, his dreadful half-hand open on his knee. Her mother lay crooked on her side, her t-shirt scrunched above her hips. Her hair, a mane of curls where Penny loved to nestle, was colored like the park's sandy paths where they sometimes walked. Straw in the neighbor boy's rabbit hutch. Dirt beneath the beautybushes. She smelled the ocean's salt as the tide rolled out to sea, waves dense with seaweed, pebbles, tiny crabs, scraps of strangers' sandwiches the gulls had dropped. She buried her hands in those curls as if that morning, that day, that life might go on forever. As if the arc of the universe could be altered.