

“What things cause you to wonder most?” Paige read to herself. She pondered the day’s writing prompt, calling to her mind thought-provoking questions. She wondered about a lot of things. She was wondering what she would have for dinner tonight, when she would go shopping for a new dance dress, and when the day would finally be over. Paige quieted her racing mind and tried to think about the things that really made her wonder. Of course, there was always the big question—who are my real parents—but that was definitely not being turned in to Mrs. Mullins, even if she did not really read the journals. Better safe than sorry. The bell rang and Paige was relieved of her thoughts and decided she would not worry about the journal topic until tonight at home. She gathered her books and headed out into the mob of kids that was gathering in the school hallway.

When Paige walked through the large glass doors that enclosed her school, a rush of wind bit at her cheeks, making her wish she had brought a scarf. The walk home only made her regret her forgetfulness even more. Most days Paige enjoyed her six-block walk, but today she was eager to get home and make a fresh cup of hot cocoa. Paige rounded the corner on to Elm street, not even noticing the quiet footsteps behind her. She walked forward for two more blocks, hoping she remembered all that she needed for homework that night. But when Paige stopped at a traffic light to wait for her walk signal, she noticed, although barely out of the corner of her eye, a shadow about halfway down the block behind her.

Paige turned around, expecting to see an old man walking his dog, but nobody was there. “Hmmm, that’s strange,” she thought. “Maybe I was imagining it.” But when Paige made her last turn on to Coolidge Circle, she could have sworn the same menacing shadow was lingering behind her. She hurried down to her house and rushed through the door, trying to ignore the day’s scare. Pulling out her homework and making her hot cocoa, the events were already fading from her mind.

The next day passed in a blur, and Paige was happy that she remembered her scarf. She headed towards her familiar route, already tasting the hot cocoa she would make upon her arrival at her house. When she made her usual right turn onto Elm, she did not notice any weird shadows behind her, but rather she noticed the beautiful autumn colors blooming on the trees. When she reached Winchester street, though, her peripherals again helped her spy the silhouette of a person. “Okay, calm down,” she told herself. “If I take a different route home and the person follows me, I’ll know it’s a stalker. If not, I’m just overreacting to a simple coincidence.” Paige usually took a left on Winchester and a right on to her private drive, Coolidge Circle. Today, she decided, she would turn right onto Winchester, heading away from her house.

Paige walked down the seven hundred block and turned around when she reached the end. She saw a man wearing dirty and torn-up clothes, walking in the opposite direction down Winchester, her usual route home. She didn’t know what it was, but something pushed her forward, urging her to follow

him. The first few steps were the most difficult, but after she crossed back over Elm, she knew what she was doing. The man kept walking down the street and Paige was careful to leave some distance between them. He finally turned left into an alley about three blocks past Paige's street. Paige crept carefully up to the alley and hid silently behind a garbage can. The man, whom she was positive was her stalker, was sitting alone at the opposite end of the alley. A bent and beaten cardboard box was perched over his head, providing little shelter from the harsh winds.

"He's homeless," Paige thought to herself, sorry that she had accused him of following her. She headed home, thinking about the man living alone in the alley. That night at dinner, Paige's brother Jake talked eagerly about the upcoming basketball tryouts, leaving Paige to her thoughts. Of course her parents showed enthusiasm for Jake, and not for her when she expressed her nervousness for volleyball tryouts. Paige did love her adoptive parents, but it was hard to appreciate them sometimes when they showed so much passion for Jake. Just because he wasn't adopted didn't mean she didn't deserve the same attention as he got.

When she was finally alone in her room, she picked up her phone and dialed the familiar number that connected her to her best friend, Nikki. When Nikki answered the phone, Paige could hardly hold back her story, and was basically yelling at her friend while describing the days' events.

"Big whoop, he's a homeless guy," Nikki said in a flat voice, seemingly more interested in the magazine she was probably reading.

"Yeah, but I thought he was following me!" Paige retorted, trying to prove her point.

"Okay, well I'm glad you have a new found interest in homeless people," said Nikki harshly.

"I'm just interested in his life," Paige answered. "But I have a ton of homework to do. I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow." And with that Paige hung up the phone and headed for her bed, fully intending not to do homework, but think about the homeless man who now plagued her thoughts.

Paige awoke early the next morning, hoping to be out of the house by 7:30. She hurried through her usual breakfast of cereal and an apple, and yelled to her mom she was going to the library for studying.

"Okay, just text me when you get there so I know you are all right," her mom answered with a phrase that Paige had heard countless times.

Paige grabbed her backpack and headed out into the cold autumn air. She started off on her usual school route, but turned right instead of left, heading for the homeless man's alley. When she reached the alley, only three blocks from her house, Paige looked down the stretch and saw no one. She walked calmly towards the cardboard box, barely able to keep her excitement and nervousness contained.

Paige lifted the top of the box, expecting it to be empty, but instead she found it full of newspaper articles. "Can he read?" Paige wondered to herself. But as Paige sifted through the clippings, she realized

they had a common theme—children being taken from their parents. They were all articles pertaining to times when children were taken to become wards of the state. One stuck out in particular though. It was circled in bright red marker, drawing her attention. The article was titled “Daughter Taken from Parents due to Lack of Care.” The article was dated December 11, 1997. The picture accompanying the article was of a homeless man and woman, sitting together on a street curb, crying.

Paige brought the article closer to her eyes, unable to stop herself from reading. After skimming through five paragraphs of the deteriorating article, Paige drew her eyes towards the photograph. The ink was fading, but Paige could still make out the large figure of a man and a woman—the man wearing the same coat as the homeless guy who had been following her! “Could this be him?” Paige’s mind raced with questions. Paige tore her eyes from the picture and looked back to the article, searching for names of the people in the picture. Finally she came across two names, Michael Harrows and Carolyn Smith. “If this really is him, it makes sense he circled an article about himself. And now I have a name to do some research on.” With the thoughts still looming in her brain, Paige heard a garage door open. She dropped the article in its original place, and scampered down the alley. She had only a few minutes before she should get to school.

Paige walked briskly towards school and made it to first period with a minute to spare. Nikki sat skimming a new magazine in the back of the room, and Paige took the seat beside her. “You, me—lunch,” Paige whispered, trying not to sound too excited about her discoveries.

“Okay, cool. What do we have to talk about?” Nikki answered wonderingly.

“I can’t tell you now. Just wait until fifth period and meet me outside by the big oak tree.”

“Okay, I’ll be there,” Nikki replied. The teacher walked into the room then, quieting the students instantaneously.

“Pop quiz on inequalities today,” she said in her monotonous tone. Finish quickly and turn it over.

“Shoot! I wish I’d done math instead of thinking about the man last night,” Paige thought. But when she received the quiz it didn’t look like last night’s homework would have helped. She was just hopeless in math. After suffering through the problems, Paige gave up and wished she could trade brains with her genius best friend. The rest of the class passed with the explanation of a new concept that Paige, as usual, didn’t understand.

When fifth period finally came, Paige grabbed her lunch and rushed into the autumn air to meet Nikki, who lay on the frozen ground beneath the tree when Paige arrived. “So what is so important that you have to tell me?” Nikki asked, sounding interested.

“Well, this morning I kind of lied to my mom and went to the homeless man’s alley,” Paige replied nervously.

“You what? That is like totally stalking and invading of personal space!” Nikki yelled.

“Yeah, but he followed me first, and I was just interested in his life. And I found some good information. There were these articles thrown all over the box, but one stood out in particular. It was circled in red marker. So naturally I read it and looked at the photograph, and guess what!”

“What?”

“I think this man had his daughter taken from him a long time ago—like about the time that I would have been taken from my birth parents!”

“How do you know the man in the article was the same man as the one following you?” Nikki questioned.

“Because the one article was obviously important. It was circled in red marker! And I’m just absolutely positive that it’s the same man. He had this huge figure in the picture, just like the homeless man I saw. And he was wearing the same coat that I saw him in yesterday!” Paige answered, practically jumping up and down.

“Okay, it might be the same man, but it’s extremely unlikely that he was your real father. I’ve heard that adopted kids like to accept any answers they can get about their parents. I’m sorry, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to get your hopes up about finding your real parents, especially if they are homeless. If I were you, I would just accept your family because they love you. I can tell. “

“Thanks, but I just can’t give up on this man. I have to know more about my past. It’s a feeling you wouldn’t understand. I’m sorry, but if you want you can help me in this, or you can just sit back and watch me,” Paige replied with a harsher tone than she meant.

“Okay, I’ll help you, but not because I think it’s the right idea, but because you’re my friend,” Nikki answered calmly.

“Thank you. Now let’s head to class.” The two girls walked to class together, feeling both anxious and excited about the new adventure ahead of them. When the afternoon was over, the girls headed out to search the worn out box again.

“So, what exactly are we looking for?” asked Nikki.

“Anything that shows something about his past or if he possibly relates to me,” Paige answered, starting to feel like their plans might actually work. The girls arrived in the alley and no one was in sight. They got right to work, rummaging through unorganized piles of articles. “They all have a common theme of adoption and children being taken from their parents,” Paige pointed out, feeling like this was what their main focus should be.

“Maybe we could find out more information about your adoption agency and see if they can tell us anything about the people you were taken from.”

“Hmm, that is actually a really good idea!” Paige said excitedly. “I already know the agency, and I could lie and say I was inquiring for a family tree project.” The ideas were forming in her head, causing her heart to race with anticipation. She might really learn about her real parents. When Paige and Nikki had poured over all the articles, they headed back to Paige’s house, hoping to do some more research on her adoption.

When they pushed Paige’s bedroom door open and threw their backpacks on the floor, the girls ran straight for the computer in search of any helpful information. Paige pulled up the page for *Adoption U.S.A.*, the agency that gave her a new home. She found a link that showed all of the children adopted from the agency. She scrolled down and found her name with the date November thirteenth next to it, the day she was legally adopted and the day she celebrated her birthday. The list made no mention of previous parents, so Paige decided she would have to call and inquire about them. For now she wanted to find any information on Michael Harrows and Carolyn Smith. She typed first Michael Harrows’ name in the search engine, finding only links for *Harrows Car Design* and similar companies. But when Paige searched Carolyn Smith, she found a link for a popular social network site. She clicked on it and up popped Carolyn’s page, showing pictures of a family.

“Well, I doubt that’s her,” Nikki said disappointed. “If she was homeless she probably isn’t rich now with a family.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” agreed Paige. “Let’s call the adoption place now and see what we can find.” So Paige dialed the number with shaky hands, nervous that her lie would be convincing enough.

“You have reached Adoption U.S.A. My name is Sarah. How can I help you?”

The voice startled Paige, but she recalled the lie she had rehearsed on Nikki just moments before. “Yes, I’ve been assigned a family tree project for school and I thought you might be able to help me. See, I was adopted about thirteen years ago through this agency. I was just wondering if you kept records of the original birth parents of the children in your agency.”

“As a matter of fact we do,” replied Sarah happily. “But I can only show you the record if you come to our nearest location and I.D. yourself as an adopted child or the parent of one.”

“Okay, thank you so much. Maybe I’ll stop by some time this week. Bye.” Paige clicked the phone off, hardly able to contain her excitement. “Nikki, we are going there tomorrow! The place is only like a mile away and we can walk right after school!”

“Okay, great! I will meet you after ninth period tomorrow by the tree and don’t forget to bring your school I.D. I have to get home though, otherwise my mom will be angry. See you tomorrow!” With that Nikki hurried home and left Paige to think about tomorrow’s daunting task.

The next day dragged on as Paige hurried through her classes, retaining absolutely no information in any of them. When the bell finally rang to signal the end of the day, Paige raced outside, ignoring the

biting cold. She found Nikki waiting anxiously by the tree, and they headed out in the direction of the adoption agency. “Do you have your I.D.?” Nikki asked.

“Of course I have it! How could I forget it?” Paige replied, setting a quick pace for her friend to follow. The girls reached the building after a brisk walk and pulled open the large glass doors. They walked up to the front counter and waited for someone to come help them. A young woman arrived in minutes and introduced herself as Sarah. “Hi, I’m Paige, and this is my friend Nikki. We talked on the phone yesterday about my school project.”

“Oh yes, I remember. I recall you wanted to view information about your birth parents. I think it’s interesting your adoptive parents never brought you here to show you that information,” Sarah said.

“Well, I never really cared who they were. I’m just here for school,” Paige answered with a smooth lie. She knew her parents did not want her to know about her real parents. She had always wanted them to bring her here and share the information with her, but they never did.

“Okay, well if you can prove that you are indeed Paige Collins I can show you the records of your birth parents. “

Paige dug through her pocket, her hand emerging with her worn out school I.D. When she showed it to Sarah, Sarah smiled and led the way through a few hallways. She pulled out a key ring and unlocked a very heavy looking door. The girls walked inside and were amazed at the sight. There were file cabinets everywhere, each labeled with a different section of the alphabet. Sarah walked over to the one that read A-C and opened the third drawer down. She rummaged for a while and pulled out a file that had a neat label. It said *Collins, Paige* in faded black ink.

Paige could barely breathe. The secrets to her past were all sitting only ten inches away from her, waiting to be discovered. Sarah opened the file and flipped through the pages in search of information. At last she handed the file over to Paige to read for herself. There on a line entitled “Birth Parents” were two names. They read “Michael Harrows” and “Carolyn Smith.” Paige was speechless. The homeless man, the one who lived a mere three blocks from Paige, was her real father. To think she had been so close for her whole life blew Paige’s mind. She was taking this all in quietly when Nikki broke the silence.

“Thank you so much, Sarah. We obviously aren’t allowed to take this file, but would you mind if we wrote down these names for Paige’s project?”

“I suppose that would be fine. And listen, Paige, I was adopted as well and I understand that many emotions might be running through your head right now. Even just seeing their names can be a real shock.” Sarah’s words did nothing to comfort Paige. She was just trying to comprehend all that happened in the past few days. The girls wrote down the names of Paige’s parents although they were sure they would never forget them. They thanked Sarah again and hurried out of the building.

“Oh, my gosh, Paige! I cannot believe this! Your real dad lives three blocks from your house! This whole time we’ve been so close. What are you going to do? Are you going to go confront him? Wait, that could be dangerous? He is homeless, remember?” Paige barely even heard Nikki’s incessant questions. She was thinking only about her father. “Are you going to go talk to him or what?” Nikki asked, sounding frustrated.

“Yes, but I think this is something I need to do alone. I just can’t wait any longer. I have to go now. Go to the park that’s right by his alley. I’ll meet you there after,” Paige answered calmly. The girls walked back towards the alley in silence, still trying to take in all that had happened. When they were about two blocks away Nikki turned towards Paige and said a gentle, “Good luck,” and hugged her goodbye.

Paige made it to the alley and peered down it. There, in the same coat as the first day she saw him, was the homeless man—her father. She walked, slowly at first, in the direction of his makeshift home. Paige gathered all the confidence she had and took the last few steps to face him. She looked into his eyes, the same shade of green as her own, and saw not a homeless man, not a stalker, not a man whose child was taken away, but her one and only real father.

“You know, don’t you?” Paige’s question startled the man. “You’ve known for a while now that I’m your daughter.”

The man looked at her with emotions Paige couldn’t pull together. There were hints of fear, surprise, and even a look of love. The man stared into Paige’s eyes for what seemed like forever before answering with a raspy, “Yes.”

“I’m not really sure what to say to you. I feel like I should fall into your arms and express my love for you, but it doesn’t seem right. I wish I had grown up with you, but now that I’ve spent thirteen years with other people, I think of them as my family,” Paige answered quietly.

In a clearer tone than before he replied, “I realize that you have your life in place and are comfortable with your means of living. I am glad I’ve finally gotten to meet you and I’m sorry you had to learn that your father is living like this. What I think would be best for both of us is if we return to our former lifestyles and ignore each others’ presence. Paige, I love you so much though I never really knew you. The only way I can show my love is by doing what’s best and letting you go.” With that, he got up slowly from his corner and started walking away. Paige could not help herself. She raced to catch up with him and enveloped him a big hug.

“I love you too. And I forgive you,” Paige answered honestly.

They both turned away from each other then and headed in opposite directions. Paige walked away calmly knowing that they had made the right decision. She knew she could never grow to love this

man like a real father and she was perfectly happy where she was. Paige was, however, glad to finally receive confirmation of the mystery that had always clouded her thoughts.