

The Hot Hurry of Mercurial Fleeting

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The Glimpsing Book

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Prologue: Conversation with a Third Grader

I don't go more than a month without asking Mom about how long and deep her memories go back. I don't know why I'm always asking her about the strength of her memory. I guess part of me is worried that I'll lose some good memories of my own. Mostly, though, I'm scared about how long the bad ones will stick around.

Mom says she can remember back all the way to preschool. Just a couple of memories, but she says they're pretty foggy—wrapped in a misty haze—no sharp edges to the pictures in her mind. And nothing very ordinary. The memories all have something unusual about them, like the time she went to her best friend's fifth birthday party, and she bought a card and present that ended up being the same exact card and present her best friend's dad had gotten for her. Creepy coincidence. Memories that stick out.

I'll share a memory with you that's jammed in my brain like when you get a tough piece of meat caught in your teeth: it hurts but not bad—just a nagging hurt—and you know it's not going to cause you cancer or anything. It's from when I was a little girl in third grade. I'd been in counseling for a few months with Ms. Kamy T. Ms. Kamy T was really Ms. Kamy Teasen, but I could never imagine Ms. Kamy T *teasing* anybody. She was for-real all the time. I told her that after the first couple of times we met, and she told me to call her what I felt comfortable calling her. Ms. Kamy T was cool like that. Red hair and freckles like me. A little

more meat on her bones than me. At the time, way more laid back than me. That made me mad at first, but then I realized it helped our conversations—made me relax. Ms. Kamy T never preached at me or told me what to do or said that I should know better than to do that or this. And she'd always shoot it to me straight—as my grandpa would say—even when I didn't want to hear the truth. I'd hate her sometimes for the truth, but she never hated me for hating her. The best part about Ms. Kamy T is she listened. I mean, really listened—not just with her ears, but her eyes and her face and her brain. Sometimes she listened so hard with her eyes that I thought she could see the memory I could see in my own mind! Like she had been right there with me. Creepy weird, if you think about it, but I just remember feeling real comfortable.

Safe.

“Do you think kids are born bad or grow to be bad?” I'd asked.

“Sometimes born, sometimes taught, sometimes both.”

“Which one am I?”

“First of all, you're not bad.”

Ms. Kamy T was always good about making me feel good. Looking back, though, I could have told her right then and there that a couple of daycare ladies, one first-grade teacher, two second-grade teachers, and two principals would have greatly disagreed with her. Of course, she'd known all that had happened. She had the records. Heck, I was seeing her because of all that.

Ms. Kamy T had continued, “Yes, you've done some bad things, but you feel bad about doing those things. I'd worry if you didn't feel bad about being bad.”

“So is my bad in my system? Something that will always be there?”

“I think you’re like most kids who all have a little orneriness in them. Just a little flickering flame of bad. But you’ve seen some things and have lived through some things that have fanned that flicker into a bigger fire.”

That hadn’t made me feel too good, but Ms. Kamy T saw me. She was listening with her eyes, even when I wasn’t speaking.

“But you’ve gotten a lot better at controlling that fire. Tons better. As you get older, and if you keep practicing controlling that fire, you’ll cool it off to where it’s nothing but a flicker again.”

I remember sighing real big and nodding at Ms. Kamy T. She had a way of saying things that made you actually believe you could do them, even when your heart and mind were telling you that you couldn’t.

Chapter One

Mom can't stop dragging the past around with her. And I don't mean figuratively, either. I seriously mean dragging pieces of the past each time we run. Grandpa's recliner dented with a permanent mold of his backside. The old church pew Grandma had to save from being chopped up into mulch. The coffee table, the TV with bunny ears, the brown-panel painted TV tray.

"The guy should be here by now." Mom craned her neck around the concrete corner of the self-storage unit. She hugged the antique wooden box to her chest. That box was a piece of the past Mom would never let go of. It was the piece that paid for a lot of the present.

Mom was already a nervous wreck, but now she was getting angry. She's pretty good at hiding her emotions, but I could feel the nerves vibrating under her skin like a million tiny needles bobbing up and down, hooked up to some hidden motor turned down to a low, rumbling hum. If you looked at her, though, all you could see was that she was serious. That's all.

It was a workout to keep my mouth shut. I was hitting cherry red mad, which is controllable—only stage two anger but still tough to keep a few sarcastic words from slipping out. During my time with Ms. Kamy T, she helped me to be aware of how angry I got. She also knew I was a pretty smart kid, even though I did some very dumb things. So we made this anger control coping skill stuff into a science project. We created a thermometer based on the color of

flames and how the heat of fire is based on its color. The chart went like this:

Dull Red = frustrated

Cherry Red = mad

Deep Orange = downright angry

Clear Orange = so furious I need a separate room; I start saying the dumb stuff

White = crazed rage, and I start doing the dumb stuff and have officially lost control (the cops have been called a few times on this one)

So right now with Mom, I was cherry red because we had stayed put in one place longer than we had in quite a while. I'd actually gotten to start a new school year with the same kids I'd ended with.

And now four whole flipping weeks into that new school year—rip!

Running again.

From my dad.

“It’ll be daylight soon.” Mom shook her head.

“It was Dad’s truck?”

“I saw it, Mercurial. It was his. Same color.”

“41,224.”

“Don’t push me.”

Fact: Dad's dad—who I never knew—bought his only son a brand new Ford F150 truck in 1988 for his high school graduation.

Fact: The first couple of times we took off on the run, Mom and I both saw Dad's truck. He was hunting for us. We were scared.

Fact: The past several times we've taken off running, Mom's the only one who has spotted Dad's truck prowling around.

The last time Mom saw Dad's truck lurking around, she freaked out like usual. She packed us up in a whirlwind hurry to escape once more. But this time I tried to stop her by making up some stuff. I'd told Mom that Ford had made 123,672 Ford 150s in 1988, and they came in three colors: silver, black, and red. Dad's was black. So I figured divided by three there must be 41,224 trucks like my dad's on the road. Take some away to accidents. But that's still a buttload of the same truck. I really did try to find some stats on the internet about Ford trucks, but I never could get the right numbers for the right year, so I improvised.

"It had the dent in the front bumper," Mom whispered under her breath.

"2,885."

"What?"

"In the last three decades, the average annual accident rate was approximately seven percent. Seven percent of 41,224 is 2,885."

"Damn it, Mercurial Kay Fleeting, do not doubt me!"

Okay, I'd made up the whole accident rate thing right there on the spot. It doesn't matter. Mom used my full name. She was angry now—I'm guessing cherry red, maybe

a little brighter than me. No changing her mind at that point, though. When Mom wanted to run, she was going to run, whether I wanted to go or not. Run, run, run—lugging pieces of the past along with us.

Plus, Ms. Kamy T always told me that when it comes to anger, you can't fight fire with fire. There's always an explosion. I knew she was right because I'd experienced enough explosions in my life. So I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When I was younger, Ms. Kamy T and I would pretend to be blowing up balloons, our arms arcing wide as we exhaled, pretending we had a huge balloon in our arms. But that was kids' stuff. Five deep breaths usually did the trick now if I was cherry red.

Dirty yellow light suddenly filled up the black alleyway. The low rumble of a big truck engine drowned out the sound of Mom's motoring nerves. The driver nearly passed us and jammed the brakes, jumping to a stop. Two guys the size of grizzly bears and about as hairy dropped out of the truck.

"You Molly?" the driver growled.

"Yes."

The other bear stared at the inside of the self-storage unit and then back at Mom. "You've been living here?"

Mom shook her head. "Nope."

"Sure does look like it."

The grizzly bear was right. It did look like we'd been living in the self-storage unit. Mom stacked up most of our items in the back, but every time we ran away, she always set up the front half of the storage unit like Grandpa and Grandma's old living room in their farmhouse.

The old TV sat on an ancient stand with Grandpa's homemade wheels tacked to its underneath, metal antennae

sticking up like rabbit ears from the wood top. Yep, Grandpa never got to digital. The small bookshelf, with a handful of paperback romances and crammed with knickknacks from the 1970s, stood like a tacky soldier next to the TV. Grandma's favorite floral sofa was on the far side of the "room." Grandpa's recliner—the one with a mold of his backside—sat center stage, like a king's throne. The brown-paneled painted TV tray sat next to the recliner.

The other grizzly bear thudded a little closer to the storage unit's opening. He soaked up some of the AC blasting away inside. That's another thing. Mom always rented the temperature-controlled storage units, and since it was like ninety thousand degrees outside—even at four o'clock in the morning—I'm sure the grizzly loved that cold air.

Mom opened up the wooden box and flipped through a few of Grandpa's old baseball cards protected in small, hard plastic holders. "You've got to load this up fast. I want to be out of here before daylight breaks."

The driver eyed Mom cautiously, like she was a dangerous hunter hiding her gun. "You really got that card?"

Mom handed him the card.

The grizzly studied it and then whistled.

The passenger bear rumbled over to his buddy and shook his head. "1954 Topps Hank Aaron #128. Whoa!"

The driver kept his eyes on the card. "Don't know if it's PSA 4 quality."

"I have another buyer who says it is," Mom replied without hesitation.

"Okay."

Grandpa had taught Mom a little about baseball cards, and she's passed down the learning to me. A 1954 Topps

Hank Aaron #128 PSA 4-rated card can go for about 800 to 900 bucks—pretty good. Back in 2008 the same card with a PSA rating of 9 (the highest is 10, which means the baseball card is in gem mint condition) went for \$28,000 on eBay—pot-of-gold good.

The driver peeked at the box Mom was cradling like a baby. “You’ve got others in there?”

Mom was quick with her reply. “Nope. Only baseball card my dad left me. My brother got the rest.”

Mom doesn’t even have a brother, but the lie left her lips as easy as the air she was breathing. I’m not saying Mom is a compulsive liar or anything, but she’s darn good at it when she thinks she needs to be.

“That’s what we agreed on over the phone.” Mom never took her eyes off the bear, who stood at least a foot and a half taller than her. Mom’s pretty tough most of the time, especially when she knows exactly how she wants things to go.

The grizzly slid the baseball card into the greasy chest pocket of his t-shirt and nodded. He rolled his head toward his partner and growled, “Let’s load her up.”

Chapter Two

We rattled down the highway through the darkness in our little tin can of a car, an ancient Toyota. Grandpa had taught Mom about cars. Mom's taught me a little bit of what Grandpa taught her. Grandpa once told me that Mom's tiny car was a lot like her: small but tough, lots of endurance. Mom didn't get a new car for graduation like Dad did. Grandpa was in the middle of losing the farm, so Mom had to work after-school jobs to pay for the tin can that was five years old when she graduated.

I snuck a peek at Mom. Her face was hard. Her pale skin was like gray stone hiding in the shadows of the cab. The red color of her hair had been swallowed up by the darkness. Then I checked the speedometer. The needle bounced above seventy-five miles per hour.

But you can run as fast as you want at night and still feel slow. The darkness tricks your eyes that way, tricks your body into feeling heavy, weighed-down. I wondered if the pull of gravity is stronger, more powerful at night.

We always led the way, the moving truck chasing us from behind. Sometimes I let my imagination run as we ran, thinking that the big moving truck could speed up and swallow us, that the past behind us that we kept dragging along would catch up and gulp down our right now.

I tried to push away those thoughts by remembering movies I'd seen or books I'd read about people escaping at night, running for their lives in the darkness, and finally seeing the morning light break. Dawn's beautiful colors—

more yellows and golds than red and oranges. Colors of hope. Happy-ending movies and stories.

But I never could stay awake long enough to see the sun and those golden colors pour over the horizon. This time would be no different. I fought as hard as I could, but I dropped into a heavy, restless sleep as the darkness of the highway wrapped around us like a tunnel heading away from the light. I waited for one of the many dreams that still haunted me.

“Molly, where’s the damn h-hot sauce?” Dad hangs on to that last word too long, slurring it over the edge of the question mark. Too much to drink. Too much anger.

Mom peeks over at me, nervous. “We’re out,” her voice a twitchy whisper.

“Can’t you do nothing right?” Dad slams his fist on the table and makes the salt and pepper shakers jump a foot. The movement knocks over my water.

I just stare at it, my stomach in knots. I refuse to look up at Dad. Silence for a moment. My stomach wrenches tighter.

“You just going to look at it? Clean it up! I’ll be damn if I-I’m going to have y-you growing up to be like your lazy mother!”

I set my glass upright, grab my napkin, and place it over the spilled water, watching the water soak through it. Mom starts to help, but before she can use her own napkin, Dad snatches her wrist, gripping it hard. I see the pain on Mom’s face.

“Please let go. You’re hurting me.” Mom’s voice is just a dust of air.

From out of nowhere comes Dad's other hand. Mom is all of a sudden on the floor. Dad is up, hovering over the table. Tears are spilling down my cheeks. But now things are silent. Dad glares at both of us, disgust painted thick on his face. He shakes his head, goes to the fridge, grabs the rest of a twelve-pack, and heads to the living room.

I woke up in the dark stickiness of the tiny car. I was breathing a little hard, but that dream was one of the easier ones. Mom peeked over at me and patted my leg.

Sleeping is not one of my favorite things to do. It's getting better. All of them used to be nightmare-intense, if you know what I mean. I'd wake up crying and shaking and sweating. Mom would have to pull over and hold me. Tell me things would be okay. Tell me she loved me no matter what happens to us.

It's not really a nightmare anymore, but obviously I shouldn't have called it a dream. Dreams are good. At least now I don't wake up crying, but my heart races a little still. Now it's more like a burned memory, branded in my brain, kind of like burned popcorn: charred smell; dry, ashy, bitter-burned taste—nasty. Stays with you for a while.

The singed memory kept me up for a little bit, but I ended up falling back to sleep, exhausted, sad, wondering, *What's next?*



When I woke up the second time, the car was stopped, and I was sweating like a fat man running a marathon on a late July afternoon. My legs were stuck to the vinyl seats

with a film of sweat. The sun radiated through the front windshield, which was acting like a giant magnifying glass. I was the ant some ten-year-old kid was trying to fry.

I peeled my legs off the seats, climbed out of the tin can, rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and got my bearings. The moving truck was parked a few feet away. The two grizzlies were plodding up and down a ramp attached to the back of the truck, unloading our stuff. Mom was inside our new self-storage unit directing placement of things and checking to see if anything was scratched. I'm not sure why she was so picky about scratches or dents. The only things we owned that were worth anything were the baseball cards.

Grandma and grandpa's old living room was just about set up again. The wooden church pew was the last piece of the puzzle.

“Well, Sleeping Beauty has awoken!”

The booming voice shocked the grogginess out of my brain. I tried to find the face that belonged to that voice, but the glare of the late morning sun silhouetted the man's round frame.

Finally, he stepped in the shade of the moving truck.

“Good morning, my dear. My name is Mr. Brighton T. Day, the owner of Brighton Day Self-Storage. You must be Mercurial.”

I nodded and shook his huge, round hand. Everything about this man was round. He was a body of humongo circles—shimmering skin and full, shiny white hair. A ball of brightness. The sun in human form.

“You must have had a long ni...” The sun of a man lost his circle-shaped smile and stared past me into the storage unit. “You cannot live in here, ma'am.”

“I know,” Mom said without looking up, still directing the two grizzlies on where the church pew should go.

“It certainly appears that you plan to do so.”

“Mr. Day, I assure we will not be living on the premises. I’m just arranging some of our items in a memory I enjoy visiting every once in a while. Due to my work, Mercurial and I usually end up living in an extended-stay hotel, which is already furnished. No room for this memory.”

“What line of work are you in, Ms. Fleeting?”

“Transportation sales.”

“For which company?”

“I’m an independent contractor.”

Wow, I thought to myself, this is a new one. But I played along. “Yep. My mom has gotten pretty good at the transportation business over the years. And sales? One of the best. She can sell anything to anybody.”

Mom shot me one of her *you-better-keep-your-mouth-shut-young-lady* expressions.

“I see.” It was obvious that Mr. Day had more questions to ask, but he politely kept quiet.

The only thing Mom knew about transportation was moving me and all our stuff every few months. Sales? She was darn good at selling stories about what her career was. Don’t get me wrong: my mom is smart, and that’s one gene I appreciate getting from her (I’m not so crazy about the freckles and red hair). But because she’s always running from my dad, she’s never had time to settle into any career. In one town she quickly climbed up the management ladder at the local convenience store. It was one of those chain stores. At one point even the regional vice president came to visit her because of how Mom had improved overall profits.

Right before she was going to be moved from assistant manager to general manager, Mom spotted the 1988 F150 trolling the area, and we hit the road.

Mom can't dig in too deeply in any one place, so she can't get a good root system going, and that means no growing in any job. Heck, Mom thinks a six-month apartment lease is too permanent. That's why we go the extended-stay hotel route, living week by week.

"Well, that's it," the grizzly moving guy said.

"Thank you."

"You need us again, ma'am, give me a call." The bear handed Mom a business card. "I appreciated doing business with you."

Mom nodded. The grizzlies loaded up the ramp, crawled into the cab, and rumbled off. There was no chance in the world that Mom would use those guys again to move. It had to be someone new each time. No traces. Don't develop relationships—not even business ones.

"We have a pretty nice extended-stay hotel a couple of blocks over," offered Mr. Day.

"I'll take a look at it."

Mr. Day turned toward wherever he had to go next. Then he stopped. "May I offer you a business proposition, Ms. Fleeting?"

"I don't think so."

"It would keep you closer to your memory."

Mom paused and studied Mr. Day's round, shiny face. "Go ahead."

"Like I told you earlier, my wife and I live in the apartment here on the self-storage site, but she has been bugging me for

a few years now to take an extended vacation somewhere warm over the winter months. Would you be interested in taking over the apartment while we head to Florida to shop for a place for the winter?”

I smiled to myself. How fitting, because Mr. Day was really the opposite of Frosty the Snowman, who always had to head to the North Pole when winter ended. Mr. Day, the human sun, was headed to sunny Florida as summer died.

“You mean, like house-sitting?”

“Apartment-sitting, in this case. I need to find someone to watch over the self-storage units anyway.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Day. I have my transportation business. How much responsibility is it to watch over the units?”

“Not much at all. I have a contractor I call if there is any maintenance to be done, and I have a gentleman who maintains our security system and cameras. You’d be surprised at how much it deters thieves just knowing that someone lives on site.”

“I can’t promise you an entire winter.”

“That’s perfectly fine. I told my wife the same thing.”