

A Great Civil War

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I am the second-smartest girl in the sixth-grade class at Ima Hogg Middle School in Houston, but Abigail Glascoe won't say *hi* to me, and Billy Goldberg doesn't want to *go* with me, and my only friend, an Argentine immigrant, doesn't know how to use English prepositions. "I'm going in my locker," Mariela says, and once she asked the populars if we could sit *in* their lunch table.

The populars consider Mariela a nerd, but they respect her because she is the smartest girl in the class, she speaks Spanish but is not a Mexican, and they know that Mariela's parents escaped an evil dictator. On International Day, when we learned foreigners are people too (even if they don't dress preppy), our history teacher, Mrs. Early, told us about the cyanide capsules Mariela's parents had hidden in their undergarments. Mrs. Early, the strictest teacher in the school, has a bun of gray hair spun on her head like cotton candy. She wears poplin dresses belted at the waist and a crucifix brooch just below her left shoulder. When she pledges allegiance, the tips of her fingernails touch Jesus' toes. I won't pledge allegiance because I don't believe there is liberty and justice for all. Mrs. Early says my beliefs are my business, but if I don't stand up for the Pledge, I'll get an F in conduct.

Mrs. Early explained that if Mariela's parents had been captured, it would have been better to ingest cyanide than to suffer the tortures of a dictator and his regime of terror. I have the option in mind when Abigail and the populars laugh at the Geraldine Ferraro bumper sticker that I've put on my binder. Abigail says I'm into the feminist thing because my mother isn't a good role model. My mother can't talk, and she probably can't think. But at Ima Hogg Middle School in 1984, it doesn't matter if you can think. What matters is what you wear, and if you can spray your hair enough so it won't move (even during the high winds of Hurricane Alicia), and the main thing is whether Abigail Glascoe says hi to you.

Abigail says no one should ever say hi to me because I won last month's spelling bee for the correct spelling of diarrhea. "Gross," Abigail said when I received my blue ribbon. But she doesn't know what gross is. Gross is Bayou side Home, the care center on the edge of the murky Braes Bayou, where I visit my mother on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays. My mother lives in Bayou side now because my grandmother, who took care of her for the last six years, is recuperating from a heart attack. I caused my grandmother's heart attack last spring when I didn't invite my mother to my fifth-grade graduation ceremony. I'd kept the event a secret because I hated the way kids stared at Grandma Lilly in high heels wheeling my mother into school. When I showed my grandmother my diploma at home, she said, "Sadie, I just did my nails. Show me later." Then she fainted and hit her head on the china cabinet, which held her crystal flamingo figurines. The blood trickling off her forehead was the same deep red as her nails. I called 911 and said my grandmother passed out from the

fumes of her fingernail polish.

Bayou side always smells like cockroach poison and canned peas. It is full of people I call radical weirdos. Barb, the seer/healer who takes care of my mother, is my friend. She switches on the TV to *Days of Our Lives* and watches with me while she feeds my mother through a stomach tube.

Barb doesn't have gypsy clothes and a magic ball. She has a diploma in psychology from Stanford University that she stuck on the wall with duct tape. She also has special intuition. The real nurses like to gossip about her. "Anyone who smokes as much pot as Barb starts to see things," they say. I know the true reason they're suspicious of Barb: she has never been to the Galleria. (Everyone knows the Galleria is the best mall south of Dallas.) Despite this, I love Barb because she promises good things ahead for me and Billy Goldberg. She isn't sure if he'll *go* with me, but something will happen, maybe even a slow dance, if I ever get invited to a dance party.

Today, when Barb leaves the room to get the bedpan, I tell my mother I love Billy Goldberg. He is the cutest boy in the sixth grade and I love him. Forever. I can tell my mother anything. Talking to her is like talking to a god. I don't even know if she hears. So I spin around in circles singing, "I love Billy Goldberg and his big nose and pink polo shirt. I want to go with him and fuck him. Forever."

I'm not sure if sex and fucking are the same. Mariela told me you can't have sex until you get your period, which means Abigail can do it with Billy. Abigail got her breasts and her period in fifth grade. Everyone at Ima Hogg knows when she has her period because before gym class she goes to the nurse's office for an Advil. Abigail uses her menstrual cramps to get out of pop quizzes. She drops tampons on the floor during class the way other kids drop pencils. Barb won't talk to me about my period. She says she knows when it's coming, "but first periods should be a surprise."

Today a rhinestone earring dangles from Barb's right ear. A silver stud sits in the left. She wears Guess jeans and a hot pink 'T'-shirt that says *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*. Before Barb takes my mother's hands, I call her to the corner of the room.

"Stop humming," I whisper.

"Humming is soothing to the patients," Barb says.

"I need to know something really, really, really important."

"First your mother," Barb says, "then we'll talk about your future."

Barb asks if my mother seemed different after last week's session. "I felt her aura reaching out to me," Barb says. "That's a sign of deep internal healing."

I don't know what an aura is, but I decide to try to send mine out to Billy Goldberg to tell him I want to be invited to his Bar Mitzvah next year. Billy's father owns restaurants. He can have any food he wants at his parties.

I practice dusting blush on my cheeks while Barb sits cross-legged on the floor next to my mother's bed. Barb's eyes are closed, and she is saying "ah" and exhaling.

"You sound like a seal," I say.

"Shhhh. I'm concentrating," Barb says. "It's hard to help your mother."

Last year, when my mother was in a coma from January to March, everything was

simpler. My mother's eyes were closed the entire time like she was sleeping, so I didn't have to guess, like I do now, if she knows who I am. During the coma, when I watched my mother closely I could see her stomach rise and fall with her breath; otherwise she just looked dead. She was so still that sometimes blew on her forehead just to see her black hair move.

The doctors don't know why she'd slipped into a coma after so many years of being sick in the same way. And they don't know why she woke up, which only means she opened her eyes and started to move her hands a little bit. She still doesn't talk or look at me. *Very Unusual*, they say. "Doctors are morons,"

Grandma Lilly insists. She believes a woman named Annie has helped my mother the most. Annie works with ailing goats in Colorado, but flies in to Houston four times a year with ointments and syrupy antidotes. Annie also brings updates about my father, who moved to Denver and married someone else, a lawyer for children's rights. He never comes to visit, but his wife sends me bumper stickers as holiday gifts that say *Kids Matter*.

Unlike Annie, Barb doesn't offer cures. She gives us ways to deal with the present, and hope for the future. Barb rises and walks over to the living area of my mother's room. This is what makes Bayouside different from a hospital—twelve square feet (I measured) with a brown shag rug, a reclining chair, and a standing lamp with a green shade. The extra-wide, full-length mirror is another important feature. You can use it to do your hair and make-up, or to examine your pigeon gray skin and soggy limbs and watch yourself wither.

"Okay, Sadie," Barb says, "let's talk about you."

"Billy might have smiled at me yesterday. I passed him three times in the hall."

"Give me your sweet hand," Barb says. She doesn't read my palm; she just grasps my hand tightly. Her turquoise Cherokee ring presses into my knuckles.

"Sadie, I have a bad hunch." Barb doesn't explain what she means. She turns to my mother, lifts her the way a groom carries his bride over the threshold, and sets my mother down in the recliner.

I begin to massage one of my mother's arms while Barb massages the other,

"I don't think I should tell you," Barb says, "in case I'm wrong. I shouldn't upset you for nothing." She smooths my mother's nightgown down so it clings to her jutting ribs.

"It doesn't matter. I'm always upset."

"Don't whine," Barb says.

She takes my hands again and we make a bridge with our arms across my mother. My mother's eyeballs are fixed in the corners of her eyes, as if she is trying to look at her shoulder. I reach over to shut them, but Barb tells me to leave my mother alone. "Maybe that position feels good to her," she says. Then Barb babbles about the nutritional value of nuts. When my mother could eat, macadamia nuts were her favorite. In the ten months she spent in hospitals, her friends would visit with potted plants, magazines, and jars of nuts. I flicked macadamia nuts across hospital floors like marbles. Sometimes, when I had the urge to crush things, I stamped them into the floor until they were nothing but dust.

Barb's bad feeling comes true on Civil War Day, when the twelve smartest sixth-graders at Ima Hogg recite the Gettysburg Address in the main auditorium. Mariela is first, even

though she's not a citizen and she speaks with an accent, then me, and Billy Goldberg is number eleven. The whole world comes to the recitation, even someone from the Lieutenant Governor's office in Austin, and a firefighter. A police officer isn't coming this year because Ima Hogg students made prank 911 phone calls from the school payphone. Now Abigail can strangle me with her twist bead necklaces, and no one will come to save me.

The populars think it's nerdy to memorize anything except the secret code they made up. I know the Gettysburg Address by heart, but as a feminist, I cannot say that "all men are created equal." No, no, no. I build up my courage to go on stage by pretending Billy Goldberg is in my bed frenching me and saying, "You're hot as a high school girl, you're hot as a high school girl."

I take the microphone and begin. "My name is Sadie Paddock and I'm proud of Houston, proud of Texas, and proud of America." I dedicate my recitation to a female Civil War heroine, Emily, who died in the battle for Chattanooga in 1863. "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all *people* are created equal."

Mrs. Early marches onto the stage and grabs the microphone. She tells me to please take my seat. She says a child as audacious as I am, a child who would distort the words of a United States president, deserves a good paddling.

When Billy's turn finally comes after eight more kids have recited the Gettysburg Address, I'm the only one who can sit still. Mrs. Early keeps taking the microphone and saying, "Any disturbers of the peace will spend the rest of Civil War Day in silent detention." Billy is wearing an Olajuwon basketball jersey. For a moment, he glances at me (maybe), and whimpery sounds form in my throat. I decide if he would *go* with me, I would give him anything, my heart, my soul, and if he asked, even a blow job. He scratches his left ear with his right hand. I lean forward in my seat and try to get a whiff of him. He smiles and says, "I'd like to dedicate my recitation to the awesomest girl in the sixth grade, Abigail Glascoe."

I can hardly breathe. Then I imagine Billy performing artificial respiration on me. When we practiced resuscitation skills in Health Class I had prayed Billy Goldberg would be my partner. But everything in Ima Hogg is in alphabetical order, which meant I had to do it with Wayne (picks his nose) Peterson. Abigail told the teacher she couldn't do artificial respiration because the nose pinching could clog her pores. Sean Boyle squeezed Mariela's nose so hard her ears popped and she got to go to the nurse's office. I leaned over Wayne and pretended to see Billy's perfect teeth, square like ice cubes. I imagined tilting back his head, and running my fingers along the curve of his nasal bone before I pinched his nostrils. I thought of slowly prying his lips apart, pulling down his jaw, looking deep in to his throat, and memorizing the hang of his uvula.

Now I think of the recipient of my dedication, Emily, who ran away from home at the age of nineteen and joined the drum corps of a Michigan Regiment. The regiment was sent to Tennessee where Emily was fatally wounded by a mini ball-bullet. While she lay bleeding, Emily said, "I am content to die."

When I studied the battle s between the North and South, I began to understand my mother's illness as a kind of Civil War. The doctors had sophisticated words to describe what

was happening to her, but I didn't know what they meant. I understood my mother's body was attacking itself. But unlike the Civil War, there was no reason.

Even though Civil War Day was a week ago, Mrs. Early, a descendent of Robert E. Lee, is giving a lecture on artillery in the 1860s. To ease my boredom, I work on my love song to Billy Goldberg. It's adapted from the Gettysburg Address:

*I cannot dedicate,
I cannot consecrate,
I cannot hallow
this love
is not shallow:*

*Chorus: Ob Billy, I only love you, Billy, Billy.
Billy this love is not silly. Ob Billy.
Feel my pain.
This love shall not die in vain. Ob Billy.*

If Billy would *go* with me, I would be such a good girlfriend; he would never have to masturbate. Abigail says girls without good mothers are always sluts. And orphans are the biggest sluts of all. I'm so slutty, last night I dreamed I was on an Indian reservation with Billy. We were swimming in nothing but the feathers on our heads. Then I realized I wasn't really on a reservation, but in the River Oaks Country Club where Grandma Lilly drinks Chardonnay with Barbara Bush.

I pass a note to Mariela with an important question: *Who would you rather be, Abigail Glascoe or Mary Lincoln?* Mariela is taking notes on rifle ammunition. She sits with her legs crossed like a grown-up, and her striped shirt emphasizes the speed bump of new breasts on her chest. She passes the note back with the answer: *Neither, unless they speak Spanish.*

On Sundays, Barb's day off, I try to help my mother. I bring her the prayers and promises I've written during the week and read them aloud. "Mom, I hope you get better. Mom, I love you even though you can't talk. Mom, I'll do anything if it will make you better. I'll even stop loving Billy Goldberg." But I say that only because there's no chance of my mother getting better. I could never stop loving Billy Goldberg. *Billy, you're in my heart and in my soul. Billy, when I'm twenty-two, I'll still be loving you.*

I walk to the mirror in the living area of my mother's room and study myself. My hair isn't combed. Small gray crescents lie beneath my eyes, but my unglossed lips are moist. The green lampshade casts a light in the room that could make any healthy body look decayed. And it's hard to focus on myself because I see my mother's reflection in the mirror. She's on the bed behind me, tucked in beneath a white knit blanket. Her dark hair sticks to her forehead like wet leaves. Her eyes are closed. With my aura, I try to tell her something cheerful: *Barb sees better times on the horizon. We just have to wait this out. Tomorrow is another day. Nothing is impossible. With the perfect mixture of ingredients— a Chinese herb, an aspirin, the juice from a tropical birds liver, topped with a dollop of Duncan Hines frosting for sweetness— the future could bring you a box of new brain cells sparkly as gems, and the doctors could slit open your head and drop them in, clink,*

clink, like pennies in a piggy bank.

Then I go to my mother and touch her cheek. I whisper in her ear, "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether this body, or any body so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." Mrs. Early might accuse me of distorting the words of a great man, but in this green-lit battlefield, it is the only thing I can do.