

# Girl

**Kit Reed**

**So, Bobie. When I phoned Atlanta your office said you were no longer in practice, but I didn't ask whether you're still on the planet. Intruders from the past don't necessarily want to know these things. You may have died long before I came looking for you, which for the purposes of this story is probably just as well.**

I mean, how likely is it that a nice old guy just about your age is still going in to work every day, let alone running flat-out for the roses in the race that some of us are too dumb to quit? It defies probabilities, although most people spend their days defying probabilities—at least writers do.

If the hand you were dealt is hard to play, you work with it, and when you move a lot, it's easier to leave unwanted lives behind. Finagle, forge documents, lie if you have to, invent futures, anything to make it better. Most of us have survival narratives—stories we tell ourselves to make it all make sense.

Or write fiction.

Growing up, I told myself, *if it gets too bad I can always move*. San Diego, Honolulu, New London, and, before I turned six, Honolulu and New London again; grade schools in Washington, New London, Panama, Florida. We were beached there for too long.

My mother thought every next move would fix her life. In the same way that she haunted Navy dispensaries in search of a cure for everything that ailed her, she believed. Long after the Navy gave up on my father's drowned submarine she kept on moving, in hopes. Hope took us up and down the Eastern Seaboard because things had to be better in the next place.

They aren't, not really, but when I landed in your town on the Carolina coast I didn't know that. You guys grew up in houses owned by your parents and grandparents before them, so you don't need to know that. Starting fresh at Beaufort High, I didn't want to know that.

I was in St. Paul's School for so long that boys stopped seeing me. In Beaufort, boys thought I was sexy because I was new.

Public school! It was like walking into a circus, all color and racket. The homeroom teacher was late. You and Bucky or Jake were hanging a ninth grader out the window by his feet. You were the tall kid with the Woody Woodpecker cowlick and an easy grin, cackling while he hollered and you threatened to let go. You didn't haul him up until Mrs. Combs smacked her books down on the desk.

Coming to attention, you spotted me. I recognized that look, *new girl*, and I thought: *new world*. I went from moody and introspective to airhead at lightspeed. You bet I was running ahead of the truth about myself, and you?

You guys, with your football gear and the girls you went with ruled the school. Alcy and Jean and Paddy and all. Paddy Watson had your letter sweater, and I thought: *I want that*. Not that I was ever in love with you. I was in love with the new aristocracy there on the Inland Waterway, under the live oaks and Spanish moss that made it all seem not quite real and, oddly, better than real, almost invented. I loved this new life in your old, old town.

Mrs. Combs shouted us into our seats. You slouched in your desk, pretending to sharpen pencils in your ear—for me? I laughed.

You leaned across the aisle. "What's your name?"

I was mesmerized by your eyebrows, but I managed. Adding, "What's yours?"

"Bobie." Right. Not your given name, but at the time you liked it better. Mrs. Combs called us to attention and you muttered, "Once more into the breach, dear friends."

I whipped my head around: "You know *that*?"

"Me? I don't know nothing." I saw the liberated me reflected in your grin. Whoever you were, you weren't that person in that school. You were one of the cool kids, roving the halls in a flying wedge.

I studied you all, what the girls wore, how they were with you. I unbuttoned that top button and rolled my waistband to shorten my skirt. I flirted. For a while there, I had everybody fooled.

I was, I thought, hundreds of miles from the old me and for the first time in a long time, I was glad.

My sweet, Three Bears family lived too many places before Daddy left us in Florida, where my mother and I ran aground for six bad years. Camphorwood chest, teakwood tables, the Chinese rugs were unpacked and set up in nine different houses—iconic objects that made each new place home. In Florida, they looked cramped and wrong. Back in New London we had snow. Daddy took us to Sunday dinners at the officers' club when his sub came in from patrol; he left often, but it was a given that he would be back.

When he said goodbye at the train station in St. Petersburg for the duration, I didn't know it was forever.

I was brave because officers' children don't cry.

Everybody on our block was old. Nuns may like smart girls, but kids don't. I thought if we couldn't move, maybe some new boy with no father would come to my school and I wouldn't be the only one. Nobody answered when I prayed for snow. Thank God we moved.

Even slick, pretty girls like Paddy didn't know the new kid was only me. When we got up to change classes, a brash, ugly one leaned in. "What's your name?"

I hated mine. I tried on a better one. "Kaysey."

She had straw hair and thick glasses and spreading teeth but she radiated power. "Cheerleader tryouts after school."

"You're a ..."

"Manager." She bared those teeth as if to gnash my cheek—I guess it was a grin. "T.J."

At three I had to climb on the olive drab Marine Corps bus with four others for the long ride out to the base, but I didn't tell her that. My mother was managing the officers' club, her first job since she quit to marry the handsome young ensign—nobody knew the future then. That year I hit rebellion full throttle, and my only mother was too worried and distracted to slow me down. I said, "OK." I'd think up some story later to make it all right with T.J.

At lunch hour T.J. let me run with her and Alcy and Paddy and

Jean and them. All I wanted was to be one of the gang. Not your gang, one of the covey of girls flaunting trinkets they'd extracted from you. They all had boyfriends except T.J., but when she let me hang out with them under the bleachers, French-inhaling and cobbling swear words, I would have done anything she said.

She ruled the pack. I took a drag on T.J.'s spit-drenched Lucky Strike thinking, *Now I'm really in with them.*

For too many reasons, I never was.

They were indigenous. They belonged. I watched them and listened hard, picking up inflections; when you move a lot, survival is about fitting in. By the end of that week I thought I looked and sounded like them, but I felt the pressure. All that year I ran hard and coined obscenities to please T.J. because at any minute the group could contract and squeeze me out like the core of a zit.

After school you guys sat in your cars, idling until all the girls I cared about got in with you and rode away. I had to wait in the cavernous bus for the other freaks: honor society secretary, thirteen-year-old freshman who looked twelve, clumsy girl with the trombone, chaplain's son; I stared out the window a lot, which is how I happened to see T.J. Unlike the pretty girls she herded like a trail boss, she was walking home. She left with big Geraldine from the cannery, trailed by this girl Jocelyn, who wore her brother's old clothes, and the foreign girl: four outcasts, slouching toward Bay Street. I couldn't figure out exactly what I was seeing, but I didn't have anybody to ask. Certainly not the lumpy trombone player or the chaplain's son with sausage-link lips or the cute Marine driver who ticked us off the list on his clipboard as we got on.

It would have helped if I'd known I wasn't the only freak, but you never let on and we never really talked except that one time, an empty Sunday at your father's store.

The thing is, Bobie, at school, talking was never just a conversation. It was all innuendo and flirting unless one of us bumped into one of you in the outside world where nobody would see.

One Sunday when everybody who mattered was someplace else,

I ran into the drug store for my mother while she waited outside in the car. I found you stacking boxes in the center aisle. Surprised to see you being so *ordinary*, I laughed. “Hey.”

You looked up, embarrassed but pleased. “Hey, girl.” Nice!

“I didn’t know you ...”

“Yeah.” Careless shrug. “Have to help Dad.”

There were a hundred million things we could have said to each other. “Oh. Is there somebody around who can fill this ...”

“He’s asleep.”

“Prescription. Um. Can you?”

You shook your head. “I’ll wake him up.”

Your smile was so nice that I called after you, “It isn’t for me.”

I made you laugh! “If he hasn’t died. It takes a while, can you wait?”

“Sure. The Mother’s in the car.” *I should go out and warn her*, I thought. All those lifetimes in the car while she shopped. Every time, I wondered: *what if she never comes out?* “The Mother worries.”

You gave back, “The Father’s out of it.”

Our grins matched. Let her wait.

So you and I stood there talking like two old friends while your dad’s creaky pharmacist fumbled around behind the counter and my mother stewed, and after old Skeezer handed off the pills we kept on talking until she beeped for the third time. I made a face and you shrugged so we hung there, talking until she leaned on the horn and to keep her from coming in after me, I had to go. It wasn’t much but in that dusty store we were just two friends talking, not cute boy and ostensibly cute girl.

Stupid of me to think it would last. That Monday I went up to you, smiling with my jaw unlocked and foolishness falling out of my mouth, all person to nice person, “So Bobie, The Mother was so mad she had a cow and beat me to death with it.”

Jake and Richie were there. All three of you turned on me, blinking. The worst thing about it was the looks you exchanged before you grunted, “Huh?”

“I just wondered what The Father...”

“Say *what?*”

It scraped me raw. “Nothing.”

“Girl.” I caught a flicker of apology as you knuckled the top of my head. “Girl.”

You were all laughing as I stumbled off.

Right, everything we said to each other in that school had a subtext: who would and who wouldn't, all of us figuring out what we wanted and how very, very much. Talking, we measured desire in degrees; who we wanted to do it with and what, how far which girls would go, which of you would push too far, bottom line, who was or who wasn't *how close* to fucking, which some of T.J.'s girls were and—get this—I found out later that, without asking, my mother assumed I actually was. How ignorant can a poor little widow be?

Safe in adulthood now, I wonder at the excitement and terror: all that *life* going on inside us, the charged atmosphere, fifteen-year-old bodies ricocheting around halls that were never big enough.

I could live with the fact that guys I ended up riding around with after night games were leftovers. Since everybody who was anybody was taken, you and I and everybody in T.J.'s gang knew that they were second string. Possible boyfriends came, they went, they tried too hard and the ones I could keep disappointed me. They were too boring, some of them, too pushy, most of them, all but the ones who weren't cute enough to presume, or were, forgive me, handsome, but too dumb.

It was OK. I was in with the gang, and if one of the girls I envied and feared had dropped you or Jake or Bucky or Richie and you had turned to me.... I ask you now, even though the answer was built in, would I have been too much for you?

Which of us would have been disappointed?

I ran with the girls because I thought that unlike you, they didn't know the truth about me.

After years of my heart bumping around like a rowboat in rough waters I needed to be part of *something*. It followed that, default po-

sition, I ran wherever those smug, candy-faced girls went, stole what they stole: lipsticks from Woolworth's on Front Street, crap earrings, plastic toys; Moon Pies and pocket combs when we sneaked off to the corner market at lunchtime to buy food and rifle the bins; on the way back from the state fair—a dozen corncob pipes from a counter card in a country store, stringing all our four-letter words like beads for the outraged owner as we rode away, snug in the back of the bus. When cops stopped us, all the fried dough and corn dogs and Crack-erjack in my belly surged. I gulped, ready to throw up.

With her fierce eyes bulging, T.J. sprayed. "Shhhh. They don't know it's us."

We nodded and sat on our hands until it became clear that until we got rid of these things we'd stolen that nobody wanted, the bus was stopped cold. We passed the stolen items forward and I was free of mine; my guts unclenched and I forgot. Pipes went hand over hand to the kids up front, landing in the lap of the ninth-grader sitting alone next to the doors. Blazing with innocence, he handed them off to the police, who made the driver wait until the owner counted them. Escaping, I was what passes for happy, surrounded by T.J. and Paddy and Alcy and them.

It was good, I suppose. At least it was good just then. Alcy asked me to spend the night after the first basketball game. I forget who she was seeing but Bucky drove five of us back from Moultrie with Alcy sitting between him and Richie in front, and Eddie Fairchild and I smashing faces in the back, thinking nothing until T.J. got out. Bucky spent a long time kissing Alcy good night, parked in front of her house. It looked like Tara from outside. The front yard slanted down to the water, with the moon making that cliché path of light out to the horizon line. I was excited. They had a dock.

Next day it was all different. I woke up sore from sleeping on a lumpy couch. Downstairs I saw bare floors and ruined antiques, cartons in corners, dog poops in corners and somebody's baby hitching along on its butt, dragging a diaper that left a wide, wet track. Alcy didn't seem to notice that her mother was missing some

teeth. Should I care? She made French toast for us. I jumped up and thanked them as soon as I heard my mother's car. I didn't want her to see inside.

If there was another culture in your school, it was submerged, either because high school is the perfect democracy or its exact opposite. A lifetime later I still can't tell you which.

I didn't care. I was in with them. I was, whispering about Paddy with T.J., Gloria with Alcy, about Richie and the new girl from Charleston, who seemed to belong without trying. I snickered and hissed with anybody who'd listen, too stupid or too new to it all to get it: Watch out what you say. The sword swings both ways.

I was so in with them that when the Marine-green bus broke down one day, I peeled off with T.J. and left the other freaks from the base sitting on the curb. No guilt. We were never friends. It would take the Corps an hour to fix this bus, give up and send another. I could follow T.J. down Front Street, imagining we were close.

"This girl Betts," I said, because Betts was newer than me.

T.J. snorted. "Fool motormouth."

"Yeah."

"Want snuff?"

"Where'd you get it?" I would have taken anything she offered, but this was before the real stuff was around and people got high.

"Gramma." She didn't say any more and I didn't ask.

I chewed. It was disgusting. I spat. "Where we going?"

"No place. Oh, Carson's. Bubble gum."

I saw the way they looked at us when we went in; they knew her. We were going to steal.

From there we went to the A&P. By this time my pockets were bulging with crumpled Fleers papers and melting malt balls. In a fit of anxiety I put four apples in a paper sack and walked them up to the counter and paid. By the time I got outside T.J. was pulling a package of hot dogs and one of those biscuits-in-a-can things out of her front. Now tell me why it surprised me. "What's that?"

She slid me a sly, evil look. "Dinner."

“Ow!”

The woman had sharp elbows. “Want to come over?” Her grin was an orange smear.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” For a minute I thought she was going to hit me.

“She kills if I’m not on that bus.”

“Well, tough tits. Tell her you ...”

“I can’t.” I held her off with my sack of apples.

“What’s this?”

“Dessert.” I shoved it into her belly and left.

I didn’t hear what she said after me, but I turned with a big, showy wave. “Saturday movie? I got free passes.”

“How many?”

I was lying. “Four.”

“OK then.”

Forgive me, I thought: let it be Alcy, Paddy, not one of those.

I don’t know what she was thinking.

The bus was idling outside the school, driver drumming his fingers on the wheel, pissed off because I made him wait. It would be cheap to say I was relieved. I wasn’t. I felt awful and I didn’t know why.

What did T.J. feel? I didn’t know. Next day I slipped into the ranks with her and Alcy and Jean and all them and we ran along together all the same but the bomb was ticking, I just didn’t know what it was or where it was.

Things were OK, I think, until the day the boys’ and girls’ basketball squads, that is, everybody who mattered, got on the bus to Columbia for playoffs while the leftovers sat through yet another Friday at school, depressed by the unidentified crap on the classroom floor, obvious now because of the empty desks.

At lunchtime T.J. said, “Let’s steal doughnuts and go over to my house.”

It turned out to be me, T.J. and sloppy Jocelyn, who I realize now was a depressive.

The other thing I was too dumb to grasp was that these people

were poor, which was by no means what bothered me when we got to T.J.'s house. When we came into the dismal front room I thought everything in it was black: walls, furniture, sofa leaking stuffing at the seams. The windows were covered with taped-up grocery bags, keeping out the light. T.J. didn't flip the light-switch and she didn't explain, but that didn't bother me. It wasn't her brother's porn collection, either. I don't think it was the smell.

The three of us sat crosslegged on the rug gobbling powdered doughnuts in the room where no light came. I was OK, at least I thought I was. Until my eyes adjusted, I didn't have to see what it was like in T.J.'s house, but it didn't take long. Hair oil and grease stains had turned the leaking upholstery black. A wide gray smear lined the walls, as though some huge animal had been trapped and circling here. The rug we sat on was damp and sticky to the touch. I crossed my arms, tucked my hands into my armpits and pretended I didn't care, laughing as T.J. showed us her brother's naked lady playing cards; they were no big deal. The photos were boring black and white. Instead of a jack, there was a giant dick and the three of us went *ha ha*, but that wasn't what bothered me.

This is what bothered me. Everybody that mattered was on that bus to Columbia. In T.J.'s grimy living room crowded with objects that you didn't know *what* they were, T.J. and Joyce that I didn't even like and I poked each other and fell out laughing, pretending it was fun.

It was so creepy, bonding with the girl who scared me and the girl I never liked, that my voice floated up. "I wonder what they're doing right now."

In a flash, sullen, unlovable Jocelyn turned hostile. "Who?"

"You know. All them."

T.J. didn't look up.

"I mean, I hope they're having a good time."

Our biggest gossip wasn't playing.

I tried, "So, I wonder who Alcy is after now that she and Richie are done. Bucky, or could she be out for Dale?"

Nobody was answering. The silence was awful.

My voice fluttered. I covered my mouth with my hand but I couldn't stop myself. "What if she's out after Bobie right now?"

"Girl." T.J. jammed her fist into my side so hard that I rocked on my haunches and almost toppled.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"I was just ..."

"All sacred and holy."

"I'm not!"

"Talking on like you and them are friends."

"I am. We are." I wanted her to stop.

"Like they were ever friends with you."

"Shut up."

She snickered. "You should listen at them talking behind your back."

Then this Jocelyn, who was always four beats behind, snorted.

"Who do you think you are, girl?"

"I have to go."

T.J. snapped at us like a bad teacher. "Sit down."

"All sacred and holy like a..." Jocelyn lunged for my ankle. "You stay and listen."

I kicked her off. "Let go."

"You stay here and listen, you snotty bitch."

Jocelyn clung until canny T.J. turned us around like counters on a Monopoly board. She jumped up. "My brother's car."

"I don't hear..."

She cut me off. "If Earl catches us, he'll kill me." She tugged Jocelyn to her feet. "We have to go."

We went.

You and the others came back from Columbia like confirmed winners, which in that school, you were. Big game: I don't remember who won. Things went on as usual, but I knew we were pretending and then my mother quit her job and we moved to D.C., so I was gone.

I wasn't glad to be gone, but I was relieved. Two years with those people in that place were enough, although it would have been interesting to watch all your stories spin out because eventually I found a way to settle down in my own life and if I'm a control freak, at least I know why. Naturally I'd love to find out about your life stories—what became of T.J., for instance, and all the unseen relatives jammed into that dark house; whether Alcy escaped the family history implicit in that sagging ancestral manse, and which of the boy heroes I followed like a gawking fan are bagging in supermarkets or pumping gas; the war heroes and executives, I know about. It's easy enough to find out on the web, but what happened to the rest of you between the year I fled Beaufort and now?

You, I know about—at least in a way. I and the Navy friend I've known since infancy were on the dance floor at the Naval Academy when I spotted you or you spotted me in crowded Bancroft Hall. Instead of reinventing, I was who I'd always been, just older. Your cowlick was tamed and you looked brand new in your midshipman's dress blues.

I don't remember what we said, I only know what passed between us: *You. Here. Yes, and. You too.* Both of us. *You made it out of there. Yes, and. So did you.* The mutual acknowledgement that we had never been what we seemed in that small town, where the small things that seemed so important to us then were nothing more than the makeshift furniture of our lives in what were, in fact, temporary rooms.

I remember your grin of recognition. *Right. We were never what they thought we were.*

We were always not so much more than that as different from that, although you were so good at dissembling that nobody guessed. I introduced you to my best friend, who would graduate near the top of his class. We exchanged how-nice-to-see-yous and moved on. And I'm dwelling on this now because?

When I was trying so hard back in Beaufort, I wish I'd known!

I would have been grateful if with me, at least, you'd let on.

So that's it, I suppose. Except it isn't.

Why, although I never heard back from you, am I still Googling you and the others, trying to get in touch?

What am I trying so desperately to get back?