

# ME ME ME

a short story by APRIL WILDER



SUSI EGGENBERGER

**WHEN MY SISTER FAWN** told me she'd decided to adopt a little girl, I was skeptical. The girl's name was Sam, and she lived in a group home run by — according to Fawn — gang members, illiterates, and pervs. Fawn had a master's in social work and had been working with lost youth for years. She felt it was time she brought one into her home, gave her a shot at a normal life. Plus Fawn had been bent on having a kid by the time she was thirty. She was now thirty-four, and I figure she figured adopting a five-year-old would retroactively accomplish her goal.

Fawn was single and sober, but she had a past, and the only kid they'll remand to someone with a past is a kid with a past — the one with bizarre scars and nightmares, the one no one else wants. Both Sam's folks were in the slammer.

"The mom might be out on parole," Fawn said. "No one's heard from her." She exhaled into the receiver. There was no point in nagging her to stop smoking since she quit almost as

often as she lit up. "It'd be just my luck: I paint her room, and then the mom shows up and wants her back."

When Fawn called, I was in the middle of playing the board game *Sorry!* with Stuart, my on-again-off-again of seven years. I suggested she get a dog instead: "One of those big, lazy hounds you can use as an ottoman. Maybe a Saint Bernard with a terminal disease?"

"You're not listening to me. I'm doing this. The paperwork's underway."

"So what'd they do to this kid?" I asked.

"God, you name it."

I named some things.

"Come on, this is a real little girl you're talking about."

"I'm serious," I said, and I was. I wanted to know what Fawn would have on her hands.

"Listen, I put you down as a reference. If they call, your last name's Bennigan. Just tell them I'm fabulous."

After we'd hung up, Stuart said he thought you had to be married, financially sound, and not on antipsychotic meds in order to adopt. He shook his head, wearing that same hopeless look he got when Ross Perot lost an election. "It's a free-for-all out there," he said. Stuart and Fawn didn't get along. He felt she was blindingly self-absorbed — a trait he disliked above all others — and she accused him of having the hots for her, to which he'd counter, "Case in point." And she'd say, "So, you're a lawyer now. How nice for you."

What Fawn didn't know was that Stuart had kept her out of jail some years earlier: She'd gotten mixed up with a married restaurateur three inches shorter than her, and the two had gone on a weeklong coke binge during which Fawn withdrew most of our mother's savings — eight thousand dollars — from ATMs. It wasn't until Stuart reasoned with my mother that she decided not to involve the law. My mother respected Stuart, and he was the last man any of us expected to speak in Fawn's defense. Only I knew about his brother, who'd once signed for a UPS package with a heroin needle sticking out of his arm.

That March we'd celebrated Fawn's third year drug-free (sparkling cider, flourless cake), but we all had our doubts that she had come clean completely. She wasn't the type to tough things out on grit alone. One year, after she'd had an abortion, she'd spent six months converting to Catholicism so she could cleanse her soul, but when she finally made it into the confession booth, the priest told her she'd been through enough and should treat herself to an ice cream. "A fucking ice cream," she said to me. "Do you have any idea what I went through for *that*? I had to talk to nuns about my sex life."

**A FEW WEEKS LATER** Fawn brought Sam home to live with her as a foster child while the adoption people reviewed her file. I drove up from San Diego to meet Sam and talk sense into Fawn. She — or, I guess, *they* — lived in one of those smog banks east of LA where guys grow television-detective mustaches and moms push shopping carts across the parking lots like they don't care if they ever make it to their cars. Fawn had moved there after trying her hand at acting and modeling in LA. She got bit parts, enough to string her along, but in the end her agent told her her torso was too long: "I can only get work for half of you at a time."

Through the screen door, Fawn asked if I'd brought a toy.

I hadn't. I asked the girl, who was nuzzling under Fawn's arm, if she'd accept a check.

She nuzzled in closer. "Cash is better."

They were both wearing bandanna halter tops and skorts. Fawn had warned me of the freaky resemblance, but holy nuts if they couldn't have passed for mother and daughter, with their slitty blue eyes and elongated torsos, curls like pencil shavings around their foreheads. Fawn wasn't so sure they weren't: as it happened, Sam had been born the same month and year Fawn's baby would've been born, had she been born, and Fawn theorized that her aborted child had been reincarnated as Sam.

We slid a batch of brownies into the oven and went out

back so they could show me their garden: a square of churned earth. They giggled as they tried to remember what seeds they'd planted. If I knew Fawn, it would all die before they found out, but I acted interested. Already Sam was calling Fawn "Mom," which made me feel like we were on a movie set. Why didn't I call her "Mom" while we were at it? Why didn't we take turns hiding in the pantry, playing Anne Frank and the Gestapo? (Which we did end up doing later, so perhaps that's not the best example.)

A guy called through the fence, "Hey, Fawn." He was sitting in a baby pool in the next yard, making a face like he was receiving a massage. He looked nineteen — twenty, tops. Fawn had obviously slept with him.

"Hey, Joe," Fawn said.

Little Sam, mimicking Fawn, juttled out a hip and said, "Hey, Joe."

Joe said, "Hey, Sneaks."

That night, after their baths, Fawn and Sam came into the living room in lab coats with their hair wound in pink towels. I'd just hung up with Stuart. Fawn undid the clasps on a briefcase, which converted into a display for the skin-care products she sold on the side. Sam pasted a strip of transparent tape across my nose, walking it down with her fingertips. When Fawn gave her the go-ahead, Sam tore the strip off my face.

"Hey," I said, "that really hurt."

They examined the strip under a powerful cosmetic lamp. Fawn asked, "When's the last time you exfoliated? Your pores look totally Third World." I could see Sam thought so too. She gazed at the sullied adhesive as though it were a window into my past, the years Fawn and I had roomed together in LA. Guys would dart across three lanes of traffic to chat up Fawn, pretending to have seen her in a magazine or a movie, glancing at me as if I might shine their shoes. I'd dealt with this all my life, though I was no hunchback myself; when I didn't think about the lisp, it went away altogether. Fawn would shrug off their advances. "What am I going to do," she'd say, "fuck *everyone*?"

After she got Sam tucked in and off the phone (who does a five-year-old call at midnight?), we made daiquiris and sat down to talk. "At your age you can't just throw in the towel," she said, continuing her sales pitch. "You've got to be on top of this shit. I have a C-booster serum that will make you look ten years younger. . . . Well, five."

I asked if she was sure she was ready for this. *This* meaning Sam.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said.

"I'm just saying, better you didn't take her in at all than wait a year or two and give her back. Then she's really screwed."

"I understand that, thanks."

Whenever I pushed, Fawn resisted my advice, regarding me as the resident know-it-all, the self-righteous windbag. So I backed off. "She hasn't had some of the advantages we had," I said. Fawn's face softened, and we burst out laughing.

She told me then she was tired of being so self-absorbed. "It gets so boring: me, me, me, me, me. It's a disease; it really is."

She combed her hair forward, checking the condition of her ends. "I mean, don't you ever think there's something else?"

"Something besides . . . you?"

She pushed her hair aside and stared at me. "You think I'm using her."

"Isn't that motherhood? I don't remember anyone asking me if I wanted to be born."

She told me she'd never felt this way before. "It feels so *right*. I love that feeling when she's at school."

When I looked up, I thought I saw the bedroom door close, but I'd been drinking, and it was late, and Fawn never lived anywhere where the doors worked right.

**MY THERAPISTS ALL AGREED** I was a textbook compartmentalizer: I coped with people and problems in my life by keeping each in a separate box. This strategy struck me as clever and sound. I didn't grasp right away that they were describing a *disorder*. I was skeptical of mental-health professionals in general, having worked for years in human resources, attending retreats where my colleagues and I debated the most efficient way to gather pine cones. But OK. I paid these people (except for the one appointed by the court), and they seldom agreed on anything. So I thought, *This one I should look at*. I decided to start writing letters to myself — get the compartments talking to one another:

Dear Gilda [I'm named after my grandmother, a name and person hated by me],

I hope you don't find it presumptuous, my writing to you. In the time I have known you, you have made some difficult choices, and though you often choose poorly, you do so with fervor, gusto, and a third word I can't think of right now. You have your moments. Only last week a salesgirl failed to ring up a hat you wished to purchase. You could've walked off with it. The hat was yours for the taking. Instead you pointed out the error, and only when the smug whore got smugger did you stroll with the item. This hat, by the way, does not look good on you. Stop wearing it. As Grams used to say, "All things are not available to all people." True, she often said this after having cut a pie into too few pieces, but I wish today to reimpart this knowledge to you, from you. Your sister suffers, as we all do. Remember this. Be decent when you can.

**THE TROUBLE WITH SAM** started with an ear infection. The doctor prescribed medicated drops, but when Fawn got Sam into the bathroom with the dropper, she would have none of it. I don't know any children myself to compare her to, but Sam seemed to me inordinately large for a five-year-old. So when the two of them went at it — wrestling over the sink — my sister went down, toppling into the tub on her keister, elbow joggling the faucet as she went. Water drummed her face while Sam hovered over her, cold and demonic. "And stay the fuck off me, you slut-fuck," she said.

"That's just the part I'll repeat," Fawn whispered to me

over the phone. "You've never heard the language comes out of that kid's mouth."

I couldn't tell if she was furious or crying. "Where are you?"

"I'm under the kitchen table till I can figure where the little bitch went to."

I suggested she find the girl and sedate her, but Fawn refused. "Don't think I haven't thought about crushing Valium in her fish sticks, but she's not mine yet. They can still take her away, you know, whether this stuff's my fault or not, because no one cares whose fault it is."

"Whose fault *what* is?"

"Shit just happens, OK? You're not a mom; you don't know. But if you're the one holding the bag when the shit comes down, you're standing in the rain with a fistful of flowers."

What shit had to do with the flowers, I wasn't sure, but I didn't like the way she sounded. That weekend I drove up. As I got out of my car, a little girl stopped me and asked if Sam could come out and play. The girl had frizzy red hair and a rash of orange freckles that made her look filthy instead of cute. She was holding a tennis ball frothed over with dog slobber. She said, "Sam wanted to French-kiss me. Then she put her tongue in my ear and tried to hump me."

When I went inside, Sam came out of the dining room holding a brush dripping bright green paint. It dashed down her knee onto the new beige carpet. "Hi, Aunt Gilda. Mom's nursing a hangover, and I'm painting."

Fawn came up behind her holding a ceramic cupid with bright green lips.

"There's a girl out there looking for Sam," I said.

The two exchanged a look. My sister said, "Red hair? Freckles?" Then to Sam, "Hon, get me the phone. I'll call her mom."

While Sam was out of the room, Fawn explained that the girl was a lesbian and unable to keep her hands to herself. "She's not supposed to come around here. She got caught making out with Dougie down the street."

"I thought you said she was gay."

"So she's bi."

"Isn't everyone bi when they're five?"

"Whatever. She's bad news. Let me clean up, and we'll talk." She started toward the bedroom. I followed, though it was always pain and agony, what went on in there — Fawn slithering around on the sheets, telling me things I wouldn't tell a gynecologist. "Stop me if this gets too graphic," she'd say. These infatuations, they never lasted. They were silly, narcissistic games disguised as mutual admiration. Always they ended with hate mail or the guy doing doughnuts in his Camaro in Fawn's front yard.

*(end of excerpt)*