

2020 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Second Place - Fiction Category

"Cut" by Emma Skogseth

*Snnnnnip. Snipsnip. Snnnnnip.*

The rusty teeth of the scissors sang a pained song as they took jagged bites of paper. Small fingers fit clumsily in the wide metal handles, dirt clinging to the underside of fingernails and smudging the drawing's white underside every so often. It took effort to push the teeth shut, but somehow, Willa June managed. That's the word Mama would use, anyway, even though she wasn't quite sure what it meant. They managed. They always managed.

"June Bug!" The voice easily cut over the feeble whir of the box fan, and Willa froze, the teeth clenched shut around the paper. There were heavy footsteps, and then, from beneath the reach of the card table, a pair of tattooed feet capped with chipped pink polish appeared. Accentuated by a curl of cigarette smoke that danced toward the ceiling of the trailer, there was no mistaking who it was; Mama always made her presence known in one way or another. "June Bug, you know you ain't s'posed to use Mama's scissors. Give 'em here, baby. I need 'em to cut this week's coupons from the Piggly Wiggly."

While the rest of Willa's body stayed locked in place, she slowly lifted her gaze, gentle brown eyes locking with Mama's steely blues. "Please, Mama, can I finish? I'm cuttin' out this purdy picture I made." Mama's eyes seemed to relent, her expression softening. The girl pushed on. "I drew the doggy that comes by. Y'know, the big yellow one? All fluffy 'n cute?" Willa's thick southern accent dripped from her words like honey, coating her speech with the hallmarks of illiteracy and a slow cadence. Observations and pleas did not require formal schooling to assemble through speech, after all.

Mama clucked her tongue. "Willa, it ain't gonna do you no good to keep thinkin' about that dog. The only reason that girl walks back here is 'cuz it's the only path to the dog park. She's not our kind. Now, the scissors, June Bug. Give 'em."

Willa sighed, freeing her fingers from the handles. She paused before she passed them over to Mama, feeling their weight in her hand and turning them one way, then the other, inspecting. Her Mama's words bit into her with the same heft of the scissors, and she found herself compelled to strike back.

"You say they're your scissors, Mama? I ain't seen your name on 'em," the corners of Willa's mouth quirked in a chapped-lipped grin, amused. Mama didn't find it funny.

A hand riddled with cheap rings and the inky names of past exes reached across the table, snatching those scissors right out of Willa's hand. "I told ya twice, girl, and you still didn't listen to me," Mama scolded. Willa's grin fell as quickly as it had taken residence on her freckled face,

her cheeks smudged with the day's grime. From the way they burned, she just knew they had been singed red by a fresh embarrassed flush. "Ain't need my name on 'em for 'em to be mine. Don't touch 'em again, you hear?"

Willa nodded, but she didn't mean it. She used those scissors every day in the garden, and a scolding wouldn't stop her. Her brown eyes flickered from the table to the small window at the right of the makeshift front door, looking out into the world beyond their small trailer for two. She pictured the puppy again, recalling the way it trotted past on paws larger than it knew what to do with, its curls fanning out in the wind. "I hear," she whispered, although she hadn't really. Her mind was on something else – no, someone else. A furry someone, to be precise. Helicopter tail. Butterscotch fluff. Canine smile.

Willa smiled as she thought about what it must feel like to pet that furry someone. Perhaps she'd get to.

Rain or shine, the girl walked that puppy through the trailer park every day. Willa June's Mama's discouragement had made her all the more fascinated with watching the young dog walk on by, and as the weeks ticked on, she found herself getting bolder, moving from her post at the window to try and get a closer look. At first, she'd watched from behind the trailer, peering out from the side. The puppy, dragging her owner close behind, would prance on past, not so much as casting a glance in Willa's direction. Willa was alright with this for some time, but as she thought about how soft that pup must be, the feel of its golden curls through her fingers, and the way it might look at her with those big chocolate eyes overflowing with love, she wanted more. She *needed* more.

After some time, Willa progressed to standing outside of the front door on the trailer's top step, acting as if she was keeping watch of her home. It wasn't much to keep watch of, sure, but that wasn't even the real reason she was out there anyway; all she wanted was to see the puppy. More than that, though, she wanted the puppy to see her, to notice her. She wasn't allowed to leave the plot the trailer sat on, but so long as the puppy noticed her, well, that would be enough. Perhaps it would pull in her direction, hoisting its fluffy, growing body up the steps towards the hands that waited to pet it. Perhaps it would kiss the dirt from her fingers and present her with a belly in need of scratches. Perhaps.

Week after week, Willa stood outside of the trailer. Watching. Waiting. It wasn't until one day when she heard a voice cry out "Daisy, stay!" and noticed the girl making a beeline toward her trailer that it seemed as though her fantasies were morphing into reality.

Willa had been so infatuated with the pup that she hadn't taken the time to become acquainted with the profile of the girl walking it. Every feature on the girl seemed to stand in direct contrast to Willa: neat caramel braids stood opposite to knotted blonde curls, manicured nails to dirt-stained fingers, a thin silver necklace with a glittering 'E' charm to a neck that had only known the gaping collar of hand-me-downs two sizes too large. It was as if they were from two different worlds, and the only thing connecting them to the same plane was the walk the girl took with that fluffy little dog. That, and how the girl was walking towards Willa's trailer right now, leaving the puppy a leash's length apart in her wake.

Willa twirled her Mama's scissors in her hand and watched the girl come closer, approaching the small garden that Willa and her Mama had been tending to outside of the trailer. It consisted of a few pots, some containing the first sprouts of Mama's cherry tomatoes, the others some miscellaneous garden flowers. Willa's favorite was the potted sunflower. She'd spent weeks carefully watering it, ensuring that it got enough sunlight, and watching it grow – in fact, she'd just finished tending to it now, clipping away the leaves that had dared to even show signs of shriveling with the rusty teeth of the scissors. Her hard work had paid off; the flower was tall and radiated beauty. Its golden petals stretched towards the sky, toward the sun, and, now, toward the hands of the girl who'd planted herself in front of it without permission. Shyly, Willa cleared her throat, taking a clumsy step down from her place on the trailer's stairs. She fidgeted with the handles of the scissors as she spoke: "It's a purdy flower, ain't it?"

The girl said nothing, brushing her fingers over the petals, the tips coming away stained yellow with pollen. Willa tried again. "You think it's purdy too, don'tcha? Not as purdy as your doggy, but still purdy. You should let your doggy come see."

"No," the girl's voice was crisp and as clear as a bell. "I won't let her come up here – too dirty. I think I'll take the flower to her instead."

"Whaddya mean?" Willa tilted her head in confusion. "It's my flower. You can't take it. Your doggy can come see it, but you can't take it. It's mine."

The girl turned her gaze from the flower and looked at Willa. Green eyes locked with brown, pretty features marred by a frown. Her reply was icy: "I don't see your name on it."

Willa remembered her mother's words. "Ain't need my name on it for it to be mine."

"Fine," the girl shot back, hands sliding to the stem. With a twist of her wrists, the stem snapped in two, the flower separated from the roots, the pot, all of Willa's hard work. Willa's mouth hung open. "Looks like it belongs to the world now."

Rage overcame Willa, drowning her instantly in intense emotion. She didn't see the sunflower anymore. She didn't see the snotty girl who was turning it over in her hand. She didn't see the satisfied smirk that curled over the girl's face as she took from someone who didn't have much to give. What she did see was the little dog and the way it tugged on the leash, seeming to look past its owner and into Willa's eyes. Helicopter tail. Butterscotch fluff. Canine smile.

The puppy seemed to see her, to notice her, and Willa knew what she would do. Perhaps it would run in her direction, hoisting its fluffy, growing body up the steps towards the hands that waited to pet it. Perhaps it would kiss the dirt from her fingers and present her with a belly in need of scratches. Perhaps.

As the girl's eyes stayed fixated on the severed sunflower in her left hand, she seemed to pay no attention to the strain on the leash in her right. This worked to Willa's advantage, as the leash was both pulled taut and the girl's attention was elsewhere. Prying the rusty teeth of the scissors apart, Willa struck, sticking the thin line of the leash in their mouth and clamping down.

*Snnnnnip.*

The puppy was free.

The puppy was free.

“Looks like she belongs to the world now, huh?”

The girl’s mouth hung open as the leash separated from the pup. With flopping ears and clumsy steps, the puppy bounded towards them. It passed its initial owner and ran in Willa’s direction instead, hoisting its fluffy, growing body up the steps and towards the hands that waited to pet it. Willa grinned, opening the door to the trailer and letting the puppy inside.

The girl seemed frozen in place, the sunflower tumbling from her hand. “What the hell did you do that for?! Give her back! She’s mine! She doesn’t even have your name on her!”

Willa grinned as she stepped toward the door, ready to step inside toward the furry someone, toward days where maybe, just maybe, she’d be the one watched instead of doing the watching.

“Ain’t need my name on her for her to be mine.”