

cindy skaggs

THE LUCKY ONES

THE COLOR OF HER SHIRT IS GREEN — HER FAVORITE COLOR SHE TELLS US — her hair blond, her pale skin tinged pink. Wrinkled shorts reveal scrawny legs; an oversized bra draws awkward creases across her chest; her eyes carry sadness.

I dare you, she seems to say, defiant and tall in her seat. There is no “or what?” Everything in her life requires daring.

At break she comes to my desk. “Professor. Full disclosure. I want to stay current with class, but financial aid doesn’t release money for books until after drop date which is two weeks away.” She adjusts to face the whiteboard rather than look at me.

“I’m homeless,” she continues. Tucks her hands into a baggy gray hoodie she wears over her green shirt. “We’re sleeping at different churches right now. My son and I.” Later, she tells us he’s a baby still sleeping in a Pack-N-Play. Poverty strikes single mothers more than most, in fact, six in ten poor kids come from a single parent—single *mother*—household.

“I may be able to swing the textbook next payday but...” Her words run together so there is no space for a response. “Ever since my husband left.” Hands in pockets. “Maybe with Friday’s paycheck,” she repeats.

“No,” I break into her discomfort, make it my own. “It’s fine to wait.”

“I want to do good in all my classes. I’m committed.” Her arms wrap around as if to make her body a smaller target.

This first day of fall classes is a study in contrasts: morning classes crowded with bright-eyed traditional students against working students with bloodshot eyes at night. In two years of teaching, I think I’ve seen the gamut of sad stories: assault, rape, a homeless journalism student who wants advice on self-publishing, a veteran with PTSD who uses medical marijuana (and when he tells this story in class, others

jump in and admit the same), countless more with traumatic brain injuries, medical malpractice, racism, disability, hopelessness, loneliness, all waiting for someone to hear their story. There is no limit to how much they overshare in an effort to be acknowledged. To matter.

But this student is a first for me.

The false bravado and the chip on her shoulder are signs I recognize. Ten years ago. “I was in the same boat after my divorce,” I say, wanting to put her at ease. “I didn’t even have my bachelor’s degree.” Now I have a bachelor’s degree and two master’s degrees. I’m the professor. To get here, I worked multiple jobs while going to school. One semester, I worked four jobs, odd hours, missing time with my kids, just to get by. I know the statistics. I’ve *lived* them. “It’s fine,” I tell her. But we both know poverty is not fine. “We will find a way to work around assignments until financial aid comes through. You have more important things to buy.”

The rueful chuckle is filled with the weight of what she does not tell me. In the coming weeks, she’ll share more with the class as she gains confidence in us. In herself. “I’ve learned not to judge anyone,” she says two weeks later. I know exactly what she means.

The color of homelessness is the St. Patty’s green of her overused shirt, week after week.

The color of her skin is warm walnut in the glow of the store’s neon sign.

The parking lot light reflects on the salty track of tears down her cheeks, past the ebony moles highlighting high cheekbones. Her steps falter when she sees me. The parking lot is quiet this time of night. Her response isn’t fear, but the shock of a witness to private pain. The cart comes to an abrupt halt. Within seconds, she straightens her shoulders, grips the handle of the cart, and marches across the yellow-stripped crosswalk, and as she nears, her eyes squeeze closed as if to say I am unwelcome.

My own gait falters then. I project my earlier conversation onto this stranger, and I see the sticker shock of life lived on the margin. One in eight women live in poverty. Even if I’m wrong about the cause, she is in pain. I continue into the store,

wishing I could have given her a smile. Knowing it would not have helped.

The color of pain is salt tracks on polished walnut.

The color of bananas is yellow.

I stare at them in the store after walking briskly through the colorful cornucopia of the produce: deep red apples, leafy greens, lemons, limes, grapes, and strawberries at the end of the season. The sweet smell of summer. All items that are not on the list. Neither are bananas. I forgot the list, though, which could be an excuse or a concern. I am trying to stay around thirty-five dollars for this quick grocery stop. Fifty at the most but my daughter likes peanut butter toast with bananas for breakfast. We already have peanut butter, I reason. The bananas are the first items in the cart. I think I can get by without the list, despite my splurge on bananas.

Crap, something quick for dinner.

I backtrack to the deli, which is closed, but has a selection of premade family-sized sub sandwiches. At \$5.48 this is a sometimes splurge for a late dinner. The stories, the student plus the woman out front, have weakened my resolve.

In an act of rebellion, I add the *sandwich*.

As long as I am in the produce section...

Salad. Damn it.

The cart seat now holds bananas, salad, and a sub sandwich, none of which is on the list. I vow not to go off script again as I head for the bread.

Once upon a time I resisted late night shopping even though the store is less crowded. I thought the crazies came out at night. Maybe they do. I'm here, aren't I?

Traffic in the bread aisle is backed up behind a family that spreads across the entire width from the freezers of vegetables to the carb-heavenly smells of breads, bagels, and buns.

The color of her sweater is deep burgundy over stooped shoulders.

A mom and three kids, one still young enough to sit in the cart. Shopping late. Like me. After a long damn day. The hand holding the cart isn't wearing a wedding band. Single-mother households are the embodiment of the working poor. Two of

the children cling to the mother, pulling at both sides, grabbing her elbow, touching her side. Not loud, but hungry for this connection. The little girl in the cart has her hands on the mother's puffy cheeks. Asking for something. "Girl," the mom says. She slouches over the cart under an invisible weight. "I don't even know who you are right now."

Like me, they have few items in their cart. The mom tells one of the older kids to grab the cheap white bread. My mother called it nasty ol' white bread because it was tasteless, colorless, and nutrition-less.

And I have my hand around a loaf.

\$1.38

I revolt. Blocking all reason, I move past the family toward the coveted whole grain. Larger slices with oats and seeds, healthier, tastier. I add whole grain English muffins for my son as the family turns the corner, the cheap white bread in their cart and the child's demands unanswered. More than twelve percent of U.S. households live with food insecurity.

I've eaten my fill of nasty ol' white bread.

Enough guilt and stress.

Enough impoverished thinking.

Just enough.

I add *sliced cheese*, three kinds so each of us has a favorite. I pick up *rice milk* and *creamer* and head for the hellish temptation of *yogurt*. School snacks, I justify. Toss in several of the kids' favorites.

Butter.

I've completely lost my mind.

Toilet paper.

Lemon juice.

I head for the dog food. On the way, I pass the school supplies.

Shit.

I shouldn't stop, but...

My son had a freak out at school. He won't tell me why. His math teacher gave him a spiral notebook and I realize the kids haven't gotten school supplies yet. His backpack is from middle school and looks like a postage stamp strapped to his 5'10 frame. He asked for a new one when school let out in the spring. I told him to wait.

But here they are. On sale: 60% off. Serendipity.

Backpack.

Spiral notebooks.

Pens.

Dog food.

I flat out embrace the crazy now. I stop back at the produce aisle to get enough corn on the cob for two meals.

Hell yeah. We're getting corn on the cob.

I find the nearest checkout line before I come to my senses.

Oh look no waiting.

The color of rebellion is toasted peanut butter and bananas.

The color of her teary eyes is brown. The girl at the checkout averts her gaze as I approach. I ask how she's doing, and the words catch in her throat. She shrugs. Doesn't say a word the entire time. Avoids eye contact and small talk.

I want to tell her it will get better.

Lie.

I want to wish her a better evening.

I want to cry when she totals \$101.

She hands me the receipt. We both avoid eye contact and big white lies. I pack the trunk like a squirrel hoarding winter nuts.

The color of silence is tears brimming over coal-colored lashes.

The color of the mail waiting on the counter is white.

White letters, various sizes, all variations on a theme. There is an overdraft in my teaching account due to the late deposit of a check for COBRA insurance, a luxury I can no longer afford. There are innocuous white envelopes from the mortgage company, the car finance company, the utilities, and more.

I think of my student. How much we have in common.

Three degrees and ten years later, and I'm a college adjunct professor. I don't get

paid in the semester breaks, which puts me behind financially. My summer course load was light, and added to it, I had kidney stones and missed a class. The college deducted my pay, and although tonight is the first night of fall classes, I won't get a paycheck for another month, and tonight I spent too much money on groceries.

Three degrees and ten years later, and my financial situation isn't much better than my student.

The kids spill down the stairs, out the front door to unload groceries.

"Why do we have all this food?" they ask, rapture and giddy laughter in their faces and lighting their eyes. Their voices lift. The supplies from the church food pantry are nearly gone, but I can only go once every two weeks, which means we have another three days to wait.

Last night my fifteen-year old son said there was nothing to eat. The food insecurity statistics feel personal today. The boy could eat six meals a day but—"Noosa," he exclaims as he unpacks two special yogurts.

"Are they both for him?" my daughter asks because she knows it is his favorite treat.

"Of course not. One for each."

"Why?" she asks as she continues putting away the groceries. The atmosphere in the kitchen is jolly, like a good party where everyone ends up in the kitchen.

My son hugs the new backpack. "Thank you," he beams.

"I went a little crazy," I say. For a moment I had lost my mind. The minor paycheck has to cover the partial payment I promised the mortgage company.

I was supposed to spend thirty-five dollars, fifty tops, but I thought of my student and the sad woman with the cart. The family in the bread aisle. The hungry son and the empty pantry. I couldn't force myself to skip the salad or the bananas. The bread. The necessities.

Ten years ago, I was that student. And after ten years of education I am still stuck, living semester to semester; defaulting on payments between semesters when I am not paid.

In the kitchen, I tell the story of these women to my kids. Their party smiles fade. My voice hitches as I try to explain why I had gone brainless in the store.

\$101 on groceries. Insanity.

My son wraps me in a hug. At fifteen he is taller than me and likes to rub his chin

on the top of my head to remind me of our changing dynamic.

My daughter joins us, adding her petite frame to our family freak out.

I don't cry, but remnants of the day steal the breath from my lungs. The homeless student, the crying woman, the single mom, and the sad cashier act as mirrors reflecting my reality. I want to help these women, but I can't even feed my kids. The weight of this responsibility — the fear — has bent my shoulders, dampened my energy, and darkened my hope. I do not see an end in sight.

I sold my house the semester my homeless student quit. Just one day—poof—gone. The student and the house, now that I think of it. I remember the joy of homeownership. The American Dream. The inherent hope of a place of our own, a challenge for a single mom. We lived there three years and eleven months; my daughter cried the day I signed the paperwork.

We're apartment dwellers now, taking the dogs to the doggie park three times a day. No yard, no mowing. Somehow harder and simpler.

The color of the fake grass in the dog park is the same color as her shirt. Too green, too cheerful. Like the memory of this student, the St. Patty's green never fades.

Only 8% of single moms who start college will finish their degree. I'm one of the lucky ones. 🍀