

I
Me and Darrell Sikes

Why did I write them? Love letters to nobody, nobody who loved me back. They made me feel foolish and better at the same time. I didn't know where to mail them, so I just saved the letters in my desk.

Dear Daddy,

How are you, I miss you, I love you,
I still love you, I'll always love you.

Sometimes I wrote, *When are you coming home?*
Sometimes I wrote, *So you're never coming home, or are you coming home?* Sometimes I wrote, *You can come home now.* Sometimes I wrote, *Why didn't you take me with you?*

I didn't keep a very tidy desk.

One day the letters poured out over my lap,

my feet, my teacher's feet. I got some of the letters back, but most of them went to the counselor, Mr. Stinger. The worst part of being in his office was watching my mom read those letters. Her face looked gray, like my letters were bad news, death news. Was she thinking I loved her less because I missed my daddy more? I felt like I was floating on the ceiling, like smoke from something burning.

When I came down from the ceiling, I pouted. I wanted my letters back, all of them. I was so mad. Isn't there a law against reading other people's mail?

Mr. Stinger took out a stack of papers, a file full of the history of me. No, not *the* history. A history. A history that didn't include when me and my mom go to the bookstore. I can pick any book I want, even a book in hardcover. That's the way it's always been. We never have much money, but Mom doesn't blink when the numbers ring up. She hands over the big bills like she was buying milk or eggs, something we just can't do without. I love choosing books by the pile at the library, too, and

listening to my mom read them to me, when she's not too tired from working. She has been my best teacher. But that's not in the history.

Mom looked at the file and her face went gray again, and again I felt gravity give out. Look at that, a pile of messy work, of unfinished work, a sloppy diary of me since Daddy left. Why didn't I write more carefully in third grade? Why didn't I finish that assignment in fourth grade? I watched as Mr. Stinger fed my letters back into the long file cabinet. The cabinet closed with a metal sound, a safe full of evidence against me. Waiting there for when they need to pull it out and call me dumb.

When we got out of the office, my mom talked in a low voice. "What do you want me to do, Sahara? Say I'm sorry that I couldn't keep him? Fine. I'm sorry. I *tried* my best. Can't a woman get a divorce without her kid going special ed on her?"

I wanted to say, *Don't be sorry, Mom, I couldn't keep Daddy either*, but I was wise now. I kept my mouth shut.

"You gonna let Daddy walk out with your

brain, too?" she grumbled. "Well, then, there's not going to be a vital organ left between us, is there! You just do your work, Sahara. They'll see they've made a mistake. You'll do it, won't you?"

I stared her in the eye, but I didn't answer her. I knew I was being fresh and bad, but I couldn't lie and say yes. Do it for what? Do it for who? They took what I gave them, they took what I didn't give them, they used it all the same way, to feed the file. I was through with giving them evidence. They wouldn't get anything more out of me.

Mom looked at me, furious. I thought she would slap me for the first time in my life. She didn't. She stomped away. I stood there, wishing she had slapped me. You're supposed to put an exclamation point at the end of strong feelings. A slap would have felt like that. But instead, her heels clicked out her punctuation, *dot dot dot*...

I couldn't see where my sentence would end.

That file full of letters meant I met with a Special Needs teacher in the hallway to get something

called Individualized Attention, and let me tell you, working in the hallway with a teacher is like being the street person of a school. People pass you by, and they act like they don't see you, but three steps away they've got a whole story in their heads about why you're out there instead of in the nice cozy classroom where you belong. Stupid? Unlucky? Unloved? If I could have put out a cup, I would have made some change. People from my class would hiss, "Hi, Sahara Special" as they passed to go to the washroom, and don't think they meant special like a princess or a movie star or something sparkly like that. I pretended like I didn't hear, but oh yes, I heard, and you don't just hear meanness with your ears. My cheeks heard it and turned red, my eyes heard it and stared at the wall, at my lap, at my shoes. My fingernails heard it, and hid away in my teeth. I heard it all through my clothes and skin and blood and all the way to my bones, where it rattled in the hollow of me.

The Special Needs teacher told me her name when I met her, but I forgot it right away. Seeing her day after day, I was too embarrassed to ask

what it was. In my mind, I just called her Peaches. In the real world, I didn't call her anything at all. In the hallway Peaches played board games with me and talked in a whispery, cooing voice like I was a doll and we were having a pretend tea party. I ignored her as best I could to keep from throwing up on her. She would sometimes ask me if I had done my homework and I would pretend I didn't hear. She spoke about using time well, getting things done. "Don't you agree that would make life a lot easier?"

I'd nod; sure, I'll agree to that. In fact, I thought, if I were *really* the school street person, I could *drink* to that, toast to it using the white milk in a carton they give at lunch, only keeping it in a brown paper bag. *Herrrrre'ssss to the people who ussse timmmme well and get thinnngsssss donnnne!*

I couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?"

I'd just shrug. She probably wouldn't think it was funny. I'd never seen her laugh. She'd write something down. Probably: *Laughs for no reason. Finds organization funny.*

Peaches seemed very organized. I bet nothing fell out of her desk in her whole life.

Then she'd ask if there was anything I wanted to talk about, and when I would say no, she would smile sweetly and look unhappy at the same time.

Sometimes Darrell Sikes would sit with us in the hall. I think he has been Special Needs ever since dinosaurs roamed the earth, or at least since the Declaration of Independence was signed. He kicked a teacher in the shins when he was in first grade, and when he was in third grade he was finally tall enough to punch one in the nose. At least, that's what people say, but who knows what's true? Mom says not to judge a book by its cover. Even so, I couldn't help but think that if Darrell was a book, the cover would read *True Crime Stories*. Darrell never spoke one word to me, and wouldn't look at me, and I thought he was a real gentleman for it. I did the same for him.

Darrell had a different set of manners for Peaches. Darrell grunted at her as if anytime she asked him something she was disturbing him from a nap. If we were playing a board game, he

would roll the dice and move his piece backward. If Peaches asked him a question, he would answer by asking, "Are you married?" and batting his eyes, looking very interested. Sometimes he would smash everything off the table with a clatter, and swear.

"I'm afraid I am going to have to call your mother," Peaches said calmly.

"Well, don't you be *afraid!* You just go ahead and call her!" Darrell hollered. "You think she care? If she care, why the hell would I be out here in the hall with *you?*"

I told my mom about this, and all about oh how *funny* Darrell is, and the next day she came to the school and we had another meeting with Mr. Stinger and Peaches. "I want her out of the program," she said, "or whatever it is you've got going on here. I'm not sending her to school to sit in the hallway with some lunatic."

"He's not some lunatic," corrected Mr. Stinger. "He's a human being with special needs."

"Special needs!" my mom sputtered. "The only special need that boy has is for an old-fashioned

crack across his behind! My daughter isn't spending part of her day with a teacher beater."

"It's just what people *say*, Mom." I pulled on her sleeve. "Don't judge a book—" She shook me off.

"Your daughter needs support during this time," Mr. Stinger reminded her, and Peaches nodded. I thought to myself, that teacher just wants someone to play Uno with.

"Maybe we should ask *Sahara* what she wants," Peaches suggested, with her usual sad-happy smile.

"Is this Christmas? Are you the Special Needs Santa Claus? Ask *Sahara* what she wants!" Mom twisted in her seat and made a noise between a cough and a laugh. "Look, I don't have time for this. I know she's capable of fifth-grade work. She reads at home. She reads plenty. I think she writes, too," she said accusingly. I didn't look at her. She whirled around in her chair and growled at me, "Sahara, tell them you like to write."

She was telling it true. I read at home, and write, too, but whatever I write, I make sure I'm

by myself and then, when I'm done writing, I rip it out of my notebook. I hide it in a binder behind section 940 in the public library, where all the books about Somewhere Else are located. This very paper, for instance, will someday be an archaeological find. Someday, someone will reach behind section 940 and find the dusty works of me, Sahara Jones, Secret Writer, and that person's life will be made more exciting, just by reading my *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures*. Someday, people will be glad I kept track. Someday, people will see I am a writer. And because I am writing a true story of my life I have to talk about school, since I am still a kid and it is a very big part of my *Heart-Wrenching Life Story and Amazing Adventures*. I am sorry to report that school is heavy on the Heart-Wrenching but so far has been running low-to-empty on *Amazing Adventures*. But I still go, because maybe one day I will have an *Amazing Adventure* there. Also, both the law and my mother make me go, unless I am sick with chicken pox or getting a tooth pulled or going to a funeral. So school is a lesser evil. Usually.

"Yes, I like to write," I squeaked.

Mom bounced her purse on her lap and smiled as if to say, "So there."

Mr. Stinger looked at me sideways for a moment. "Yes. The letters."

No, *not just the letters*, I wanted to tell him. *Not just those stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid letters that grew legs to follow me around.* "So, can I have those letters back now?" I tried to sound like honey with sugar on top.

"Well, we need something to show that you like to write, don't we, Sahara?" Mr. Stinger smiled. "We certainly don't have any schoolwork to make that point. And this is what I'm talking about. Where is the work, Mrs. Jones? *Where is the work?* She doesn't do it here."

"You're saying she doesn't do her work? So take care of your business! Fail her! Fail her like a normal kid. The failure will be between me and my daughter, then. You won't like it if her failure is between me and you."

"There are serious repercussions to retention. . ."

"Blah blah blah!" My mother can be very rude.

So they promised to fail me. "Remember, you asked for it," they said to my mother. They made her sign a form. Then another. Then another.

The door closed, and we stood out in the hall. I knew they were talking about my mom behind the glass, saying mean things about her, about What Sort of Mother Would Deny Her Child Individualized Attention. But Mom was smiling and I was proud, really proud of my mom not being afraid of failure. I am. I'd sooner not try than fail. They may think I'm stupid, but I'm not. Knowing I'm not stupid is enough for me, I'm enough for me. When my mother smiled at me, I could see I was enough for her, too. At least, for that moment.

I walked back to my classroom, past the little table outside the door where Darrell was sitting in the public of the hallway waiting for Peaches to return, drawing on the side of his shoe with a black marker. He didn't look at me and I didn't look at him. But in my head, I said, *Oh, thank you, Darrell Sikes, for being wild and nasty and rude and getting me out of The Program and making me*

Normal Dumb, not Special Dumb. I owe you one, Darrell Sikes.

But I could not imagine how I would ever pay him back.

My True Ambition

I like when my mom listens to me in the kitchen, when she asks me about my day. She always asks if there's anyone new I'm hanging out with or if I'd like to bring anyone by the restaurant. She asks even though my best friend stays the same: my very own cousin, Rachel Wells.

Rachel is a year younger than I am. Rachel's voice is like pages turning, whispery and smooth, and there's time in between each thing she says. She looks at her feet when she speaks in her paper voice, and her cheekbones get pink like she's telling you about the time she forgot to wear her underwear even if she's just telling you what she had for dinner last night. Rachel moved away for a while with her mother, father, and little baby brother, Freddie. She came back

with her mother and brother. My mom and her mom find a lot to talk about together. Rachel left the same time my father left. But Rachel came back.

That is reason number one she is my best friend.

Some of the girls at school thought Rachel was stuck-up, but I knew she wasn't. For real, shy girls usually aren't. They usually care more than anyone else about what other people think. It's like they're walking on ice, and the ice is made of other people's opinions. But there's something not-nice about shy people, too. Something kind of stingy in the way they make you talk first, and then their answers are just one word. That's why it took so long for Rachel to join us upper graders in double Dutch. Always holding back. I had to go over to the fence, special, to get her.

"Rachel, oh come on, take your turn, jump, jump!"

But she wouldn't, not for the longest time. Even now, she always lets other people jump first while she turns the ropes. So reason number two

that she is my best friend is because I always have to look out for her.

And reason number three is the fact that she's the only one who knows my True Ambition.

But for now, nobody can see my True Ambition, so nobody believes it. I only believe it because I saw it, just once, just for a second. I saw it in a crystal ball. All right, it wasn't a crystal ball, it was a goldfish bowl turned upside down. It was the middle of summer, and Rachel and I needed something to do, so we tried telling fortunes at the kitchen table.

"What do you see?" I asked Rachel.

"Nothing," she shrugged.

I waited for her to ask me the question back, which is the polite thing to do. I got tired of waiting.

"Know what I see?"

"What?"

"Nothing," I said, just to be mean. But I did see something. I saw my own reflection, turned upside down. Something in me tilted, and I knew. "No, wait, I see something," I announced to Rachel. "I'm going to be a writer." The words came out all by themselves.

"You?" She blew some air through her nose and shook her head.

"What?"

"Like, a *writer* writer? With a *book*? In the *library* or something?"

It sounded so good! "Uh-huh."

"What are you going to write about?"

"Oh, just . . . stuff."

"What stuff?"

What stuff? "Everyday stuff. Interesting stuff."

She looked at me like I was homework. "Everyday stuff isn't interesting stuff," she pointed out. She took out a deck of cards from the kitchen drawer and began to shuffle them. "Writing a book's too hard."

"How would you know? You've never even tried."

"I never tried 'cause it's too hard. I wouldn't write a book unless somebody made me. I have no *in-ter-est*," she explained.

"Well, I'm going to make me," I announced. "I have interest. I am going to be the youngest

writer ever to have a book in the library. You'll see."

Rachel looked at me hard, like she saw the sparkling of Lake Michigan in my eyes. I smiled at her, and hoped she saw good things, exciting things. She blinked, and frowned. No, she just saw my eyes, brown. Brown like brick, like the high-rises that block my view east, block my view of the lake, block my view of what's moving with hardness and stillness and curtains hung crooked. The buildings hunker there, like boxes in a closet, blocking the way to hidden birthday gifts or other surprises the grown-ups haven't told us about. But I know exciting things are there, hidden, just a matter of pushing past.

"Then you better get a good teacher this year, Sahara," Rachel warned, like I have anything to do with *that*. Why does she have to talk to me like she's grown?

"I need *support*, huh." I flashed her a look. Rachel must have decided there were no more fortunes to tell, because, back and forth, she dealt the deck for War. She turned over an ace of

spades. "Jeez, Rachel. Don't you ever make any wishes?"

"Well . . . I would like to be able to see without glasses. And to not have to watch Freddie so much. And . . . I guess I wouldn't mind having a cousin who's a famous writer," she said, collecting my two of hearts.

I bring home a big pile of books to read every week. I usually stay inside, because we do not live in a good neighborhood. When my mom sends me to the corner store, she watches for me out the window the whole time, and I see Mrs. Rosen watching, too. She is so old and shrunken, her head is hardly higher than her window box, but there is her head, like one of the flowers. I don't like the men sitting in the cars and drinking on the street, or the low-riders that pass with the bass so loud on the radio that my fillings rattle. Rachel and I are allowed to skate up and down the block, but in the summer Rachel usually goes to Cordelia Carbuncle's house to play in their yard, and I am not invited. I tell myself it is because I am older. I

tell myself I am glad. I don't even like Cordelia. Rachel has lost her glasses three times on purpose, because Cordelia told her there is not one single famous model who wears glasses. So when I went to the dentist I borrowed a copy of *Seventeen* from the waiting room and drew glasses on all the girls. It made Rachel laugh, but she still tries to copy Cordelia and does what she says. For instance, Cordelia's momma lets her wear makeup. Rachel complained so much that her momma let her wear lip gloss on Sundays. It did look kind of pretty, so I asked my mom if I could wear makeup on Sundays, too.

"The only reason a girl your age should wear makeup is if she's a rock star or a hooker, and the minute you start showing promise in either of those areas we'll hop on down to Target and stock you up with everything you need," she promised. "Don't you tell your auntie I said that, now. What she does with Rachel is her business. I just happen to think there is nothing more attractive than a sensible girl," she said.

"To who?"

"To *who?* To *God*," she said. "And when you go to God's house, it ain't got to be no fashion show. You just come as you are." She gave me a squeeze. I think if my mom had to name her best friend, I might top the list.

But Cordelia tops Rachel's list. Rachel and Cordelia like to sit out front when she comes to visit. When the teenage boys say hi to Cordelia, she says hi back. Rachel doesn't exactly say hi, but she acts busy with her baby brother on her lap or smiles that terrible well-I-don't-know-what-else-to-do smile that makes me cluck my tongue and want to pinch her.

"How come you don't say hi?" Cordelia asked me once.

"I don't know them."

"They're just being friendly."

"They've got no business being friendly."

"That's why you don't have any friends," said Cordelia in a perky way.

"I do too have friends."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Beezus. Beezus Quimby."

"That's a *peculiar* name," said Cordelia.

"So's *Carbuncle*," I said. "Maybe if you didn't make fun of people's names, *you'd* have more friends. Come on, Rachel, let's go upstairs."

On the stairwell, I talked low. "Don't talk to strange men, Rachel. We don't have daddies to beat them up if they come bother us."

Rachel nodded and asked me, "Who's *Beezus*?"

"I met her when you moved away," I said, "and then she moved when you came back to town."

Rachel does not like to read. She likes to watch TV. So does Freddie. He bounces in his playpen when the people on the talk shows start throwing punches. Sometimes I am in her apartment, but mostly I stay in mine, which mom says is fine as long as I lock the door if she's at work. I open all the windows and the breeze and music from the ice-cream man floats through and lifts the curtains. I lie on my bed with my feet up on the wall and read. I roller-skate around the apartment until Mr. Martinez knocks his broom on the ceiling. I write in my notebook and rip out the pages to take to the library. I make lunch of canned sweet corn and

boiled hot dogs, which I pierce with a fork and hold over the gas burner to turn the skin black, just like a real campfire, just like my daddy taught me. My daddy was a great cook. He even did it for a while for a living. My daddy could do anything. He liked to try new things.

New things all the time.

At the Library

Mom tries to get the Saturday morning shifts at the restaurant. The tips are good, and I love it because she drops me off at the library. I can stay until noon, and then she runs and gets me and brings me back to the restaurant, and I can have pancakes. The library is so air-conditioned that I have to bring a sweater, and when I go in I just have to say "Ahhhh," it feels so cool. I sit near the librarians, like sitting near the bus driver on the bus, it's just safer. They smile and say hello, but they don't talk to me, which doesn't feel as mean as it sounds. It just feels calm and ordinary. I sit in a big brown straight-back chair at a big brown table of smooth wood. I like to sit there and write my life story or

read the Ramona books by Beverly Cleary. When I read those books, the rest of the world melts away and I am on Klikitat Street. Ramona has a dad, and sometimes the mom and dad have fights. But they never break up. Sometimes I read the books twice, but the endings never change. In a story, if you write a happy ending, it never has to change. It stays happily ever after.

Sometimes the books have pictures of the authors on the inside back covers. It's fun to see what they look like. Sometimes they look much older than I thought they would be, or are a different color than I imagined. Sometimes there isn't any picture of them at all, just a description of how they live in Massachusetts with two dogs or something. But real, live authors wrote every one of those books, so the shelves are like lines of quiet people, sitting up straight and polite, waiting to talk to me. Someday I'll have a book of my own. Someday my book will talk.

The library has regulars on Saturdays, mostly mothers with babies and toddlers, but there is one girl I notice who is close to my age. She usually

wears pigtails, but her hair is so kinky that they look round and funny, like mouse ears. She has a nick, some kind of scar in the hair of her left eyebrow that makes her look serious even when she is smiling. She is skinny and always comes with her skinny brothers, all older than her, who swarm around her but don't seem to bother her as she picks out books. She mostly goes to the arts-and-crafts section, but sometimes she pokes around *my* section, with all the books about faraway places. I have to watch her then, because I am worried and excited that she might discover that my papers are hidden there, but she doesn't. She just pulls out the books and reads them cross-legged on the floor. She puts a pencil in the spot where she takes out a book so she can put it back in the same place. She's very organized.

Once I was watching her and she looked up at me, straight into my face. I almost died. But her eyes were steady.

"Hi," she said.

I waved, even though she was right in front of me.

"You look familiar," she said, and pulled her lip, trying to remember where she might have seen me before. *Probably sitting out in the hallway at school*, I thought. I felt my cheeks get warm, and I couldn't decide what to say or where to make my eyes go. She shrugged, and seemed to give up trying to figure it out. "You're here regular, huh?" she said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Me, too." She smiled. "My mother makes my brothers take me. She hopes they'll look at some books, but they never do. They just wait for me and drive the librarians crazy." She let out a little laugh, and I joined her. "I'm Paris," she said.

"The city?"

"No. The girl." She looked in the direction of her brothers, who seemed to give her some secret signal. "Well, see ya," she said all of a sudden, and jumped up to join them.

I couldn't stop thinking about Paris and imagining talking to her. *My name is Sahara. The girl, not the desert. Oh, do you like to read? So do I. What do you like to read? So do I. I like your hair. How do you get it*

to do like that? Sure, I would love to come over. Let me ask my mom. . . .

"Who you talking to?" Mom calls from the kitchen. I did not notice I had said anything out loud.

"Nobody," I answer. I rehearse some more, but I am careful to keep it inside my head. I imagine bringing Paris to the restaurant where my mom waitresses. I imagine sitting on the high stools at the counter with her. *Look what a big pile of pancakes! Oh, Sahara!* I imagine my mom's face as she heads back to the kitchen, after putting down plates for me and my best friend. The thought of it makes my insides bubble.

The next Saturday, though, Paris brought just one brother and a girl, a Spanish-looking girl with long black hair and glittery butterflies on her shirt. They leaned over a cookbook together, at the big table. *Let's make this. Let's make this.* I sat apart from them, behind them. As they left, Paris noticed me in my corner. "Oh, hi!" she said. "I was looking for you! I didn't see you."

Really? "Hi," I said.

"Didn't you see me?" she asked.

The question took me by surprise. "No," I lied. She looked at me, holding her cookbooks against her chest, as if trying to decide something. I looked away from her and pretended to go back to reading. *Who cares about you?* I thought. *Go bake your brownies.*

But she didn't leave right away. She seemed to stand there staring at me for a long time. Her friend waited patiently in the doorway. What were they waiting for?

"Wellll . . . bye," she said finally.

She left. "Well, bye," I said.

I sat for a long time and counted the books in a pile in front of me. I counted them up and I counted them down. But just then I didn't feel like reading any.