

I am She. She is Me.

WINNER

By April Oliver

Foreword by Bret V.

WINNER - In this courageous and affecting story, April Oliver depicts the destructive influence of shame and shares the wisdom gained through overcoming isolation. With a voice that is analytical yet vulnerable, she explores themes of regret as well as the pain of a missed opportunity. In doing so, she arrives at lessons that are both personal and universal. April's story reckons with empathy as not just an emotion but also as an enabling condition, asking how we as individuals can use our compassion to connect with others despite our fears and defenses.



In the Peach Blossoms by Kelly Emerich

The lobby was fairly empty as I glanced around the room taking in the all too familiar scenery that I had become so accustomed to over the last few months. Remnants of Christmas decor still lingered leisurely throughout the space as if it had not already come and gone. The bright red poinsettias that adorned the tabletops and the glittery snowflakes that dangled from the ceiling exuded a sense of excitement, while the lighted tree in the corner of the room invited you in and insisted that you feel welcomed here. An aroma of warm vanilla sugar filled the air creating a coziness that engulfed you and persuaded you to feel safe. I, personally, liked it here and even though in recent times I had been coming quite frequently, it never grew old because I looked forward to the experience.

I slowly walked over to the registrar to check in for what may be my last visit and was greeted by Ms. Ruth with the brightest, most contagious smile ever; it caused me to smile back. She was always so kind and excited to see me which in my world was a rarity so I appreciated every encounter with her. "Hi April, how are you feeling today?" she asked with such genuine concern and I, not wanting to overwhelm her with the burdens of my truth and fighting the urge to explode into a river of raging tears, merely responded with "I'm ok." She proceeded to check me in and instructed me to sit in the waiting area assuring me that someone would be out to escort me to the back shortly.

As I sat down and began rummaging through the pile of parenting magazines strewn about on the table, I could hear the clinical staff giggling behind the big,

sliding glass windows that guarded the registrar's desk and I couldn't help but envy their outright display of happiness; these days I wasn't allowed to be happy instead I was just supposed to feel the constant shame of my past transgression. When I finally stumbled across a magazine whose cover read, "Top 10 most frequently asked questions by teen moms," I picked it up and began flipping through the pages. Reality is, I had no idea of what I was doing and no one was interested in teaching me but I was determined to use every resource available to me to learn even if it was just an old crumpled up magazine at a doctor's office.

In the lobby there were two other young ladies who weren't too far removed from my age. The first, accompanied by an older woman who was possibly her mother, was engaged in a joyful conversation; they too laughed. The other, however, sat there quietly like myself staring off into space as if she were in deep thought; I recognized that state of mind and I empathized with her. I could see the bugle beneath her shirt and I wondered about her story. How old was she? What was she thinking about? And is she having a boy or a girl? I said nothing though and nor did she. We just sat there, waiting. Neither of us ever cracking a smile. Both of us remaining alone, isolating ourselves from the outside world for fear of harsh words and unjust treatment. Both of us just trying to protect the little bit of sanity we had left.

In recent years, working as a Peer Recovery Support Specialist, I have been awarded the opportunity to assist other young ladies that have shared this same life experience and learned how so many of us walked that journey out alone. I think about that girl and how much we may have had in common if we had only been courageous enough to talk. I ponder the many facets of how that conversation may have went and speculate on where she is now. I wonder if she went on to accomplish great things or if she was defeated by the bitter realities of life. I contemplate the many ways we could have supported each other on that journey and if she's using her story to empower others too. I, then, think of how we sat there in silence that day, never making eye contact, afraid of connection and holding tight to the defenses we'd developed from unspoken experiences, and I wonder if she ever overcame.