

Excerpts from **HOPE WAS HERE**

by Joan Bauer

We walked across the street to the old Buick that was packed to the hilt with everything we owned and had a U-Haul trailer chained to the back.

It was May 26. We were heading to Mulhoney, Wisconsin, to start work in a diner there that needed a professional manager and cook (Addie), was short on waitresses (me), and was giving us an apartment. The man we were going to work for had been diagnosed with leukemia and needed help fast. I don't mean to sound ungenerous, but working for a close-to-dying man didn't sound like a great career move to me. I had to leave school right before the end of my undistinguished sophomore year, too.

I hate leaving places I love.

We were about to get into the car just as Morty the cabdriver double-parked his Yellow taxi.

Good old Morty. The first time I waited on him, he unloosened his belt a notch before he even looked at the menu. I knew I had a true believer.

I raised my hand to a great tipper.

"You always took care of me, kid!" He shouted this from across the street as a UPS truck started honking at him to move his cab.

"I tried, Morty!"

"Wherever you go, you'll do okay. You got heart!"

The UPS driver screamed something heartless at Morty, who screamed back, "Watch your mouth, big man in a brown truck!"

I didn't know what kind of customers I'd get in Wisconsin.

She grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze.

Addie never promised that life would be easy, but she did promise that if I hung with her the food would be good.

Believe me when I tell you, I know about survival.

I was born too early and much too small (two pounds and five

ounces). For the first month of my life I kept gasping for air, like I couldn't get the hang of breathing. I couldn't eat either; couldn't suck a bottle. The doctors didn't think I would make it. Shows what they know. My mother didn't want the responsibility of a baby so she left me with Addie, her older sister, and went off to live her own life. I've seen her exactly three times since I was born—when she visited on my fifth, eighth, and thirteenth birthdays.

Each time she talked about being a waitress. What made a good one (“great hands and personality”). What were the pitfalls (“crazed cooks and being on your feet all day”). What was the biggest tip she ever got (\$300 from a plumber who had just won the instant lottery).

Each time she told me, “Hon, leaving you with Addie was the best thing I could have done for you. You need constants in your life.” She had a different hair color each time she said it.

Addie's been my number-one constant. . . .

Because of this, I don't buy into traditional roles. My favorite book when I was little had pictures of baby animals, like foxes and lambs and ducklings, who were being raised by other animals, like dogs, geese, and wolves.

Addie said it was our story.

I stared out the window as the Buick roared west to whatever.

Harrison Beckworth-McCoy, my best male friend at school, . . . had given me a goodbye present, and I was opening it now as Addie pushed the Buick through Ohio. Inside the box was a small glass prism that caught the sun. A hand-printed note from Harrison read, “New places always help us look at life differently. I will miss you, but won't lose you.”

Harrison was always saying sensitive things like that, which put him instantly on Jocelyn Lindstrom's male sensitivity chart. He was the only male either of us knew who had made the chart consistently over twelve months. Donald Raspigi, who occasionally said sensitive things like “Nice sweater,” had been on twice.

Enter memories, sweet and sour.

Harrison and me baking enormous mocha chip cookies for the high school bake sale and having them stolen on the Lexington Avenue subway.

Harrison's African fighting fish, Luther, who ate Chef Boyardee ravioli without chewing.

Harrison reading my mother's photocopied annual Christmas letter that she sent to family and friends—"Dear Friends. . . ." (She'd cross out "Friends" and write in "Addie and my little Tulip.") Harrison commenting that motherhood should be like driving a car—you should have to pass a test before you get to do it legally.

I held the prism up to the light. The sun hit it and showered colors through the windshield. "Now isn't that something?" Addie said, smiling at the sight. "Yeah." I looked out the window, trying not to cry.