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## Finders Keepers

Nicole Bredeson

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## Finders Keepers // Nicole Bredeson

The morning started off like every other one that summer: bullshit. I woke up 20 minutes late only to realize the alarm had been set for 8 PM instead of 8 AM. My favorite black and purple sweater had a stain on it – on the light purple section, of course. I drove the four minutes to work cursing my life and praying for cop-free roads. I pulled so far into the parking space that I hit the light post. Already at my emotional max for the day and all before 8:40 in the morning, I wrestled with the crusty seatbelt and flung open the door.

I threw my keys down on the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. The back windows were down. They were always down and quite honestly, I wasn't even sure if they were even in there. I had decided that no one was going to steal my 1989 Renault Alliance and if they did, fine, fuck you. Try getting a replacement part for that shit box.

My father told me: "If you leave the keys in the car one more time, I will make you walk to work!" I told him I would quit. We stared stubbornly into each other's eyes until finally a smile crept into the corners of his mouth, pulling his tired eyes into the endearing squint that reminded me of my childhood. "You can be a real bitch, you know that?" he laughed. I did know that.

As I paraded across the parking lot in front of Chili's Bar and Grill in Kissimmee, Florida, I was counting off the things I had to be pissed about. I hated working. I hated working Sundays. I hated working at a restaurant owned by my father's best friend. I hated being a hostess. I hated customers. I hated being stuck in Fantasyland, USA because my mother needed "a break".

"A long visit with you will be good for her, Scotty," she told my father. "She's 16 years old. She needs some structure, some distance from her irresponsible 'friends', and a job."

"I'm not gonna stop her from seeing her friends, Cath."

"That's not what I am saying. I am just saying that she needs a break from being with them 24/7. Now if she wants to see them she will have to make the two hour drive back to Largo and she will have to pay for her own gas. For that, she needs a job," she reminded her ex-husband.

And so, like a family-owned and operated boarding school, my father took me in. I was awarded shelter in the front cubicle of his single wide trailer in Sherwood Forrest Mobile Home Park. "It's 55 and up," bragged my father, "but I know the law. They have to let a certain amount of families in, and you bet your ass I called them out

on that." My father had conquered the politics of trailer parks; I was proud.

My temporary bedroom was decorated floor to ceiling in rainbow colors. My six year old brother, who normally inhabited this space, was a huge Jeff Gordon fan. The carpet was a swirling rainbow so big that it curved up the walls. The walls were an interminable Rubik's Cube of red, green, blue, and yellow. Three floor length windows with the blinds pulled tight to the top illuminated the absurdity of the room. "It's important to let the sunlight in; sunlight kills the bacteria," my father droned. *The bacteria*, I thought. Could it get any more dramatic than that?

The bed was one of those white metal framed day beds with gold caps on the corner posts, extracted from a fairy tale book where the beautiful princess falls asleep waiting for her dragon-slaying prince to arrive just in time. The sheets, of course, had the sunglass framed face of a bushy headed man in a racing suit. *Hello, Jeff. Mind if I lie on your face?* I chuckled. At one point I counted all things Jeff Gordon related in the room: 97. There were posters, ticket stubs, soda cans, t-shirts, bowling pins, you name it. The room was a vicarious atonement for a clearly stifled childhood: my poor father.

So I was stuck in that room, in that shoe box trailer, in the 55 and up (*except for us, damn it!*) mobile home park, with my little brother, my dad's girlfriend, and my clinically-or-not insane father, for the entire summer, 'stabilizing myself' and 'learning some responsibility'. Part of that responsibility was getting a job and part of that stability was working where my father could "keep an eye on me". So I had to work at Chili's.

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Determined to make it back to Largo to see my friends that upcoming weekend, I went into work hating the world. The day picked up fast and we were unusually busy for a Sunday. We had our regulars: the Middle Eastern family, party of 10, that ordered 2 chicken fajitas and 10 waters with no ice – extra plates please; the You-Should-Come-Check-Out-Our-Church Baptists, party of five or six or eight, that ordered quirky treats like "I'm having dessert!" for lunch and all you can eat soup and salad, "but just one bowl of each please"; the elderly couple sharing a Presidente Margarita, sitting so quietly across from each other that I unwittingly tip-toed whenever I passed by their table.

But that Sunday would invite a different crowd. It was summer, the beginning of summer, and that meant tourists. Not the usual tourists. Not the school's-out-early southern Florida tourists, or the Mid-Western beat-the-heat family reunion crowds, but the fanny-pack strapped, lobster pink skin, neon green running shorts and offensively clashing tank-top adorned friends from the North: Canadians. Canadian tourists didn't tip and that made for a shitty day for everyone. The servers blamed me for seating the tourists in their section. The tourists blamed me for the servers taking "too long."

In order to keep things moving quickly, I had to help clear and clean tables. I was fast at it and I enjoyed the break in the monotony behind the hostess stand. I sometimes cleared, wiped, and sat tables before the server returned from running food to another table. On a normal day, this made the servers happy. They tipped me extra for keeping their sections full. Today, they glared at me from across the room. Yet their indolence inspired me to work faster. I would keep those fuckers busy if it killed me.

Then it happened. I reached table 53 to clean it and re-seat it quickly. There was a party of six waiting and this booth was large enough to fit them. More than that, Sherry had a bad attitude that afternoon and I thought she could use a nice warm glass of shut-the-hell-up to make her feel better: so I aimed to sit tourists in her section all day long. However, when I reached the table I noticed a forest green fanny-pack lying in the corner of the booth. It was zipped shut and pushed halfway between the seat and the wall. I yanked it free feeling the crispy mesh pouch full and heavy in my hands. I brought the bag to the hostess stand, opened the cabinet, and slid it inside. I returned to finish cleaning and seating table 53 as if finding a huge sack of what was surely someone's entire life savings was a perfectly normal occurrence.

When I got back to my post, the lobby was eerily quiet. It was just after the lunch hour and the rush of guests had ceased, the doors finally closed. I opened the cabinet just a bit to see the dark green satchel staring back at me. I slammed the door and looked around. The servers were quietly closing up their sections and getting ready to head home. The guests were bent over their plates and into each other, the outside world shut out from their private lunches. The bartender was re-stocking the bar, oblivious by nature to the world around him. I opened the cabinet again, crouched to my knees, and stuck my head inside.

The weighted bag jingled when I turned it on its side. I slowly unzipped it, desperate to know what was inside. I felt my breath catch in my throat as the folds peeled back in both directions. *Money. Lots and lots and lots of money.* I counted quickly, my finger jutting between hundred dollar bills at lightning speed; when I got to two thousand dollars, I stopped counting. I zipped the pouch shut hard and silently sealed the cabinet. *I'm going to steal this money and quit my job.* I knew it was true in my heart before it became a concrete thought in my mind. I could feel the crispy dollar bills in my hands. *Where would I put them?* I was wearing a skirt and a sweater – I had two hours to go before I could leave – Where would I tell my dad the money came from – Fear after fear berated my mind, but still, I knew I was going to take this money, no matter what.

I waited for the surrounding rooms to clear and then I struck. I gathered a stack of papers from the top of the counter and pretended to be putting them away in the cabinet. I opened the deserted treasure chest and pulled out a bill, just one bill. I rolled it tightly in my hand, zipped the bag, and stood up. Glancing around the room, relieved to find that I was still alone, I opened my fingers. Benjamin Franklin stared out, his face distorted by the scrunching of the bill. He smirked up at me, lips pursed in a knowing grimace, one eye questioning his beholder. I clenched the bill tightly in my palm and shoved it into the waistband of my skirt. *Dear God, don't let money start dropping out of my panties.*

I waited ten minutes in absolute stillness. I measured my breath. I fantasized greedily about jewelry and make-up, never once thinking about the oblivious visitors, now trapped in the Sunshine State without a dollar to their name. The clock struck two, my shift was over. I had decisions to make. I had gotten away with one bill, could I take more? *Could I take it all?* What I did next, I will never understand. Terrified to take more, unwilling to take less, I returned to the darkness of the cabinet, the violated fanny-pack unmoved from its safe haven. The sound of the zipper magnified by the paranoia of my ears, I reached in and took just one more bill. Moving faster than before, I scrunched the paper in my hand and shoved it beside the first one in the elastic confines of my skirt. I could feel the two tiny bulges stabbing into my abdomen, the pit of my fear pushing back against them.

I had started a routine: reaching in, yanking out hundred dollar bills, each one a consolation prize for my patience. As I pre-

pared to reach in for my third self-indulged token of appreciation, the front door swung open, slamming hard against the inside wall. A rabid looking woman, with closely cropped red hair and uncannily matching over-bared skin rushed through the lobby to the hostess stand. She came within inches of my face, assaulting me with the smell of sweat and panic. The air in the room tightened and I could feel the walls closing in around us.

“...and then I realized I *had* to have left it here!” she was screaming to no one in particular. I adjusted my eyes to see her face, shutting out the feelings of nausea and vertigo that suddenly overwhelmed me. I watched as she raced over to table 53, searching on hands and knees under the booth and the floor areas surrounding it. Her frenzy had alerted the staff, and servers and managers were searching with her, the volume rising in the room causing the noise sensing sound system to follow suit. Within minutes, I was surrounded by the wailings of Celine Dion above me and the concerned squawking of the restaurant crowd around me. “Have you seen it? Have you seen it?” someone finally asked.

I smiled with the corner of my mouth and nodded my head ever so slightly. The woman gasped, slamming her palms against her chest. I bent into the cabinet beneath me and unearthed the cure to her shattered dreams of a fun-filled and care-free vacation. As I placed the pouch in her shaking hands, tears dropped from her sun-scarred face. She mumbled thank-yous over and over in the direction of anyone who might be listening. I continued to smile, pulling my bottom lip further between my teeth, the fear of her sitting and counting her dollars right there crippling me into stillness. The hijacked humps hidden beneath my waistband were there to stay. There was no way in hell I was going to give myself up. She had two thousand dollars in there, it's not like this \$200 was going to break the bank. Finally, the woman turned and jogged out of the restaurant, her head lifted in joy and gratefulness. *The vacation is saved!* she would tell her momentarily downtrodden family. Perhaps they went for ice cream to celebrate their good fortune.

As I turned to head back into the kitchen to clock out, I collided with the manager standing behind me. I shrugged off my jitteriness as surprise and asked if I was free to go home. “Yes,” he nodded, “and good job today. Thank you for keeping that woman's purse safe.” I agreed, bobbing my head in acceptance of his thanks and admittance of nothing. I marched stiffly to the back, begging the

mounds in my pants to defy gravity and imbed themselves into my skin. Luckily, they obliged.

I reached the newfound safe haven of my shit box car and tugged open the door. Climbing inside and sinking into the soft foam driver's seat, I fully exhaled for the first time in several hours. I had no idea if I was in the clear, but I knew I needed to get home, crawl under Jeff Gordon, and sleep for a really long time. I slid my hands beneath my legs in search of my car keys. A moment passed and then I panicked. *Not today!* The keys were not there. I wanted the car to be stolen - but now? Now the keys would disappear? Lifting my bottom to one side, I scanned the seat with my hand finding only a small piece of folded paper. I yanked the paper out, intending to cast it to the floor, when I realized *it hadn't been there before*. I unfolded the note, irritated by its mere presence at a time like this. The chicken scratch handwriting stared back at me, pressed darkly in black pen, the urgency of the messenger implied through the harsh juts and streaks of the letters.

Nicole,

Told you not to leave keys on seat! Finder's Keeper's. Walk home.

Dad

I walked home feeling the hundred dollar bills itchy against the skin of my stomach the entire way. I could hear my father's snide voice resounding in my head: *Finder's Keeper's. Finder's Keepers. Finder's Keeper's*. I enjoyed a good, hard, relaxing laugh the entire way home.