

THE LADY WHO WAS AWESOME. A story by Y York copyright 1992

I knew it was bad; I heard the sirens all night, but it was worse than bad—three hundred people with nothing to begin with, completely wiped out. Early Sunday I hear on the news they're taking donations over at the school. The school is the connective tissue between my street and the low-cost apartments just east, one of which burned down in this fire. I go to the closet, and anything I haven't worn in the last year goes in the box. The school cafeteria is chaos. I look at my box and wonder how a size six lady is even going to know to take it. I borrow a marking pen and write FEMALE SIZE 6, shoe size 7. Behind me I hear, "just put down your box and go" It's the agency guy. Boy, is he frazzled. Maybe he thinks I'm there to steal.

"Do you want me to start marking the boxes, the contents?" It hasn't occurred to anybody that things have to be labeled. So I sort and mark and re-box. The boxes keep coming and after a while, I see somebody is helping me. She's younger and faster. She's not boxing, she's unboxing, laying things out in small neat piles on the lunch tables, making little outfits. Empty boxes are piling up. What are you doing? "The people," she says, "will need a box for their selections. If we pre-box they're going to end up with stuff they can't use." She's holding the box I brought. She pulls out a nightgown from my friskier days. Holds it up and says "Oo la la, why do you think she gave this away?" Oo la la?, I'm not going to admit the she who gave it up is me or that the she who gave it up currently has no use for it, I say, "she wanted somebody to have a nice thing. Wanted somebody to be happy in the midst of their sorrow. And anyway, none of these donations are throwaways. A donation should hurt a little or it isn't really generous, don't you think?" For some reason this makes her happy, or she's happy because I start following her unboxing technique, anyway, she's happy, she smiles and shakes my hand, tells me her name so I tell her mine. We unbox for hours and even though more conversation happened, all I remember is the name exchange, which is amazing considering what happens three days later. The agency guy calls.

"Can you come in--we want to talk to you about something." I hope they don't think I stole—I'm not going to be able to prove I didn't. But they don't think I stole; as a matter of fact, I've been vetted -- thoroughly.

They want me to "take Sophia." Who? Just for a little while. Become a foster household until Sophia's mother can finish the semester, finds a new apartment. Who? Sophia's mother, you know, Dolly, the young woman you helped with the donation boxes. It's her idea. The woman I helped? Never mind.

This is the last thing I expect, I mean I've thought about it, who hasn't thought about it, but my life is a mess. I don't even know if I like living in a house and tending a vegetable garden. I don't know if I'm staying.

But I hear myself saying, how old is she? I vaguely hear answers: eight, school in the neighborhood, they lost everything. What I'm doing instead of listening is mentally carving up my house, making a room for Sophia. "She can have the bedroom next to mine, I'll put my office in the basement; I'll need some help moving the bookshelves down". And when the agency people come, I think they're there to move bookshelves, but no, they're checking for smoke detectors and whatever. They take care of the bureaucracy, I'm on my own with redecorating.

Dolly brings Sophia to the agency office. Dolly and I chat like we actually know each other. Nice to see you again. How you making out? Glad I can help. This all for Sophia, who stares at the floor. Dark clouds pass over her. I don't see her eyes, but I've been told they're blue, but I don't find out because she doesn't look up. I'm very nervous when I show up to get her three days later. Who knows what goes on in somebody else's head, particularly when somebody else is eight.

We put her bag in the car. It's a bag, her bag. She doesn't look at me. Why should she, for her whole life she's heard don't get into a car with a stranger. "Let's walk around before we go." She looks at her bag in the backseat. "It's okay, I'll lock it." She looks unsure, so I get the bag. I see a stuffed toy inside, a dog. I figure she wants the toy, and she does. We walk side by side. Just walking. I don't want to ask her questions. I've seen that with kids - their conversation with adults is adults asking and kids giving one-word answers. "How was school?" "Fine." I don't want to do that. She doesn't say anything, so I figure I'll tell her about me, how I came to live here after living other places around the world. I tell a story I don't ever tell so Sophia can get into a car with a person instead of a stranger. It takes a while. I buy us cones and we sit and drip and wipe. Pretty soon, I stop because I feel stupid. We head to the car. We stop at a corner—look both ways before we cross--she takes my hand, looks up. Yeah, blue, sort of a midnight blue.

Everything changes, but nothing really changes. Generally, I go through my same life scramble, I just have to pick her up at school at two thirty to walk her home. She talks to Dolly every day on the phone and sees her at least once a week, usually twice.

She brings home things for me to sign, permission slips for trips. I'm asked to be a parent chaperon, whatever they call it, on the aquarium trip, and I do it. Then, one day it's a letter, sealed. I am very nervous, she's nervous. "You didn't do anything, didja?" She shakes her head. Sophia has an opportunity. The letter explains some program for which she has been selected. She's to go to a different school in a different

neighborhood, if I give my permission. MY permission? MY permission? When did this happen they ask MY permission for something this important? I call the school. I'm uppity, I'm indignant, I'm outraged.

I'm an idiot.

They've already asked Dolly. They need my permission because I'm the one's gonna have to ride her to the bus every morning at six-thirty.

I attend a meeting about the new school. We're all real proud, our kids have been selected. They tell us about the special classes, and I wonder why those programs aren't in our school, but yes, they're great, and I'm excited for Sophia. She'll be challenged and stimulated.

That first afternoon I'm there a half hour early to meet the bus, so are all the parents. We try to be cool, but we're hopelessly excited. All the kids rushing to their Mom or Dad to tell them all about it. Sophia's bursting, but she remembers to be restrained around me. I check my watch and figure we've got just enough time to intercept Dolly from her job and ride her to her night class. It's a great ride. The two of them sit in the back, I go to a drive-through to get reasy food that we love. Sophia tells her good news: She got called on, she knew the answers, maybe she's going to go to fourth grade next week. They giggle their joy. First thing I asked the agency guy, why don't they both move in? But Dolly has half a semester until her finals and graduation, let her head be clear by knowing Sophia is safe. Dolly, she's about the right age to be a youngest daughter of mine if you really stretch reality, but we've worked out a kind of peer thing based on our mutual affection for Sophia. Maybe someday we'll be friends, but there's resentment goes along with all gratitude.

We drop off Dolly and Sophia instantly turns it off the way she does when it's just us. This time it's so obvious that I laugh. I see her in the rear-view. She almost laughs but catches herself.

A few days at the new school, Sophia makes a friend. This is the first time I've heard her mention another child, and I am very curious, but ever fearful of those one-word answers, I don't ask. I wait, and little by little I hear about Jennifer. Jennifer is nine, Jennifer is in the fourth-grade class that Sophia now attends, Jennifer lives in the neighborhood of the new school, Jennifer is beautiful. "What does she look like?" Her hair is fine. That's all I get.

Sophia comes home with a sweater I don't know. "What's that?" Jennifer. "She can't give you her sweater, her mother will get mad." No. Jennifer has a lot of sweaters, she wants Sophia to have this one. "Well, do you want to give her something?" A glazed gaze I don't recognize, then a sullen, "no". Great. Sophia doesn't think her stuff is nice enough to give, I mean that sweater is nice, it's wool that hasn't started to ball yet, I don't even know how you do that with a wool sweater. "Well, you want to bake brownies you can share?" We

do, Sophia watching me the whole time, impressed that I don't use a mix, furious that I haven't made them before.

The brownies are a hit. Jennifer's mother, Mrs. Cabot, calls me. Sophia is invited. To their house. I think, what do you mean invited? I don't know you! But I say, "when would this be?" She wants to pick them up Friday after school, the girls can play for a few hours; Mrs. Cabot will ride Sophia home after dinner. Sophia is standing right there; I have to say yes, but this visit is very costly in anxiety. I worry she won't like the food; she didn't like anything I had—we ate McDonalds that first week. I worry they'll ask her things and she'll answer with one-word answers, I worry something will be missing and Sophia will be blamed, well I don't say anything about any of that to Sophia.

The Cabot car returns Sophia at 7:30—I've been at the window for an hour. She drives the kind of car that the ad says, if you love your family, you'll put them in one of these. It's a horrible mustard color. Why did she do that? I mean if she can buy that car, she can afford a decent color. I don't know what's expected. Do I go to the car; does Mrs. Cabot come to the door? Neither of those happen.

Sophia bounds out and rushes into the house, too excited to remember to be restrained. They have a house on the water, there's a boat at a dock and they own it, they have a big dog, and the dog has a house sounds as nice as ours. She didn't like the steak, though. Sophia likes her cow chopped and on a bun; that's my girl.

School becomes Jennifer, but Sophia keeps up with her assignments, so I have no moral high ground from which to complain. I'm worried about all this "stuff" the Cabots have. I don't have anything like that.

A few more visits to Jennifer's, and I decide it's time for Jennifer to visit us. I call and leave the invitation for a sleepover on the Cabot's answering machine. Yes. Jennifer may come. That Friday, I meet them at the bus.

"How do you do, Jennifer?"

They don't notice me but continue their whispered conversation in the backseat. Jennifer and Sophia are a study in physical contrast: Jennifer is tall where Sophia is small; pale where Sophia is dark; blonde thin hair where Sophia's is black and abundant. I didn't know when Sophia said her hair was fine, she meant her hair was fine.

Sophia shows her around; we're both nervous, but score! the child is thrilled by the garden. We hoe and harvest for an hour, Sophia instructing Jennifer in my gardening techniques. I let them wash the dirt off the vegetables and make the salad. She loves our tacos and refried beans; she's never had them.

Jennifer goes to the bathroom. Sophia is beaming. Isn't Jennifer beautiful. It isn't a question, but I say, yes, quite beautiful. Pained that if this is Sophia's standard - what does she think of herself?

The time for pain passes as the two little girls take the food scraps to the worm box. Jennifer wants to feed the worms. We're scoring in ways I could never have imagined! Eeks and eyus even from Sophia who feigns indifference when it's just us. Jennifer thinks Sophia's room is cool or fresh or awesome, something. My office, her room, to fill a couple of rainy weekends that Dolly needed to study, we painted a rain forest complete with huge animals on the walls and ceiling. It isn't subtle. It's a dream.

Sometime in the night, Jennifer gets up to go to the bathroom. She's groggy and asks for milk. She sits next to me to drink it. I say, we're very glad she could come stay the night. She says, Oh, yeah, I couldn't wait, Sophia told me you were awesome.

Sophia said I was awesome.

"Oh, well, I think Sophia's awesome, too." "Oh yes," She says, "Sophia is awesome, and so beautiful; I wish I was that beautiful."

Oh.

"Oh, Jennifer, you are, you are."