

## NATALIE HANEY TILGHMAN

### GREEN

Eloise heard horror stories on her first day of work. Under the fluorescent lights of the break room, her female coworkers—white, gray-haired hippies with crow's feet that started where their eye liner stopped—descended upon Eloise's table and unwrapped their tofu pitas.

Each case manager shared a story. There was the malnourished runaway who lived under Wacker Drive and used all her panhandled money to go to Sunday matinees. And the homeless pregnant woman who visited her social worker in a different fur coat each week, all gifts from "a boyfriend." Eloise learned that one client, a recovering alcoholic and born-again Christian, was particularly trusted, even given a receptionist position at the day shelter. She streamlined the check-in process because she never forgot a face or a name. Then one day in December, when the workers were in a staff meeting, she stole all their wallets and bought \$4,000 worth of shoes at Neiman Marcus.

"Most of the charges were on my card," sighed Jane, the clinical supervisor. "It took me two months to get them reversed. That's your first lesson, Eloise, never self-disclose to these women."

"No matter how much you trust them," a case worker added.

"You are..." It seemed as though Jane was about to mention Eloise's age. "Green. And they know it."

Eloise nodded but kept her eyes fixed on her salami sandwich. Her coworkers were all jaded. Already, she felt that she didn't belong.

That evening, Eloise rode Bus 71 home from the day shelter, even though her coworkers advised against waiting alone at the stop.

"You'll get mugged," one warned her.

"The Gangster Disciples hang out on that corner and deal cocaine," another one said.

Eloise hardly noticed two men with cornrows, who stood watch on the corner smoking cigarettes. Another Chicago winter was already bearing down and she shuffled from one foot to the other to stay warm. By the time the bus came, she had lost feeling in the tips of her fingers.

The bus sighed and pulled away from the corner. Eloise looked at her reflection in the window. A twenty-five year old Korean American woman with high cheek bones, almond-shaped eyes and silky hair stared back at her. As a child, Eloise studied her reflection a lot, and by the time she was three, she knew she looked different than her parents—red-headed Marlene and blue eyed Tom—because she was adopted. Marlene, a school librarian, had introduced the concept of adoption to Eloise through a children's book. Marlene found a book for every difficult issue that Eloise might encounter in life—death, menstruation, sex—and subscribed to the theory that published authors could say just about anything better than she ever could.

Marlene told Eloise a more detailed adoption story when Eloise reached fourteen and hungered for more information. The call came one Saturday in March when Marlene had just finished planting in the garden. She had reached the phone on the last ring. After four years of adoption interviews and waiting, a baby, three months old, was theirs: an orphan. Both parents had died in a car accident in Seoul one week before and the relatives were unable to care for another child. Marlene had called Tom away from painting the barn door and they celebrated with a bottle of wine in the empty nursery. "It's simple, really," Marlene told Eloise, "We were over the moon with joy."

Eloise was not embraced by everyone. Each summer, she rode with Tom and Marlene to Kentucky to visit Grandma Pullman, the family historian and Eloise's namesake. Tom tried to make it fun for Eloise, taking her into a nearby mining town to buy lemon drops at the country store and helping her to catch butterflies in the tall grasses behind Grandma's house. But it was a trip that Eloise dreaded. Grandma never seemed to accept the fact that Tom and Marlene could not have biological children. The topic usually came up when Grandma thought Eloise was asleep: "What is she, Tom, a Vietnamese? God, your father would roll over in his grave if he knew you brought one of them into your house."

To make matters worse, Eloise had to sleep in Tom's old room, surrounded by yellowing photos of the Pullman clan. She tossed and turned at night, imagining generations of light-skinned Pullmans on the opposing