

Girls Drive Jeeps – Candace Meredith

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By

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*Dedicated to my three children who inspire me to write and
to my loyal partner who without him life would feel
incomplete.*

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Preface

When Tamara Day met Blakely O'Connor it was the turn of a new decade. That's when they were newly thirteen and I was sixteen. Blakely, my sister, got rides from her big sister – that's me, Vanessa O'Connor, and this is Blakely's story. The one story that I know. The story she would tell if she wasn't being modest. Blakely and Tamara were best friends. They did everything together, and at the end of this story there is a lesson, and I'm going to tell it from the beginning.

Chapter One

Class had started. Blakely casually opened her notebook and began to pencil her name when the table adjacent to her erupted with young female banter.

“You’re ugly,” the frail blonde said from across the room.

Blakely looked up from her notebook to find a timid, beautiful girl sitting in front of her turning away from the blonde and the brunette.

“Don’t let her talk to you like that,” Blakely said with an attitude, but Tamara was startled.

“Shut up!” Blakely scolded the blonde and turned to Tamara. “Seriously, don’t let them talk to you like that.”

“You don’t have to defend me,” Tamara’s voice cracked.

“They told me the same thing. That I was ugly. Just yesterday. Don’t pay them any attention – you’re not ugly.”

Blakely had this thing where she could stick up for others, but she couldn’t stick up for herself – she was too shy and the fearful type. She found her strength when sticking up for the underdog. Tamara was taken aback. No one had ever stood up for her before. With the

passing of each day, in literature class, as they sat facing one another at a table made of four desks all pushed together, Tamara and Blakely's bond grew, and they had an affinity for each other. By the middle of seventh grade, Tamara and Blakely were known to hold hands, sit in one another's lap at the lunch table, and be otherwise inseparable. Blakely wasn't exploring her sexuality at that age, but she loved Tamara and Tamara loved her back. They were best friends, and as close as anyone could get. Blakely began wearing makeup in junior high and the boys noticed her. Tamara joined her at the mirror and together they coated their lashes with the darkest noir. Our father did not approve. This was the time of our parents' divorce, when Blakely and I stayed with our father to finish out the school year. Blakely became rebellious after a shady upbringing with a mother who seemed to cherish her moments with alcohol and boyfriends over time with her daughters. Our father didn't know how to handle Blakely. Blakely was not interested in obeying. She took her makeup to school and wore showy clothing. My sister came to me for advice about how to get away from Dad's strict policies, but I wasn't much help back then. I had my first boyfriend and I had a Jeep. It was red. I was a fiery and fierce redhead behind the wheel of my own ride. My very first ride. I, too, went wild. The first place I took my sister was on a trip to a theme park where roller coasters and rides abound for the wild child at heart. Blakely and Tamara got to ride in the back seat while I drove with the top down and Adam, my boyfriend, gloated in the passenger seat.

“I’m riding shotgun with all these hotties,” he said.

Tamara and Blakely blushed. He was sweet to her and her friends. To others, we looked like an open pack of Skittles: our hair was vibrant hues of red (mine), jet black (Blakely), and dirty blonde (Tamara). Adam’s was auburn and he decided to grow a goatee. Adam Hardt was still a teen, too, just turned nineteen, and Dad was unsure about him. But he was athletic and played ball at the local technical school. I was in my junior year of high school and would be turning seventeen in June. That’s when school would end and Blakely would turn fourteen in July. The theme park was a three-hour drive from home. Back then, during our parents’ divorce, it was usual for my sister to be in my car. I took her everywhere; our mother was usually absent. It wasn’t that she didn’t love us – she did. She worked hard, but she played even harder. She worked long hours as a cocktail waitress, then stayed after hours at the casinos. She loved to drink. The party was our demise and her pastime. She left our father. Dad didn’t know how to handle us, especially with Blakely’s first period – that is, when again, I came in. I broke it all down for her casually. She listened. Life was full of things they don’t necessarily teach in biology class, but should.

School was out. Our birthdays were pending – another month and then two. We enjoyed our close birthdays. We were close as sisters. Tamara was like a sister, too. The high school girls began to treat them differently; they wanted them as friends. They wanted

their energy and their passion. They asked why they held hands in the halls; they didn't care – they answered simply *because she's my best friend*. They meant it. Tamara's brothers, Tommy and Shane, often took care of their sister the way I took care of Blakely. Tommy was the oldest, aged twenty-four, and Shane was only a year older than Tamara. Shane adored Blakely, and I realize now that Tamara was jealous of that, too. Tamara lived in a one-bedroom house with her bedroom being a walk-through to her parents' room. They, too, were in the middle of a divorce. Her mother was taken to another man. Her family was broken, and they were cared for by a lonely father. I realized later that Tamara needed the bond of a woman, which she found in Blakely. Her mother was absent, too. I get it. But not all endings are happy. I will carefully, casually, break the news. But there's a story with a beautiful past, too. So, I'll start with that. When, during Tamara's folks' divorce, they began to party, how they became popular, how they went to senior week, and how, when it came crashing down, they were left with their faces to the rain. Not talking. This is a story about love, hate, and love again. This is a story about friendship and loss.

School let out officially on June 5th when we weren't skipping. Blakely had her yearbook signed by her junior high friends. The pages were filled. She and Tamara gained popularity among them, but they all were to be divided between two counties; there were those to attend Bell High School and others Stanton High. Blakely was to attend Bell and Tamara to attend Stanton. But Blakely was quick-witted; she forged an out-of-district

form by our seldom seen and absent mother. I told her it would never work but then she begged me to take her to school, just until she got some wheels of her own, and I caved. I gave in to that poor plight of a girl who didn't have a mother. Dad was dating by the summer. He found the mother of a friend who was named Alisa; her daughter, Samira, was Blakely's friend. A friend after the fact. After Blakely stopped taking crap from other girls, she gained Samira's respect. Samira had lush, long eyelashes, and a body to die for. She had always been popular with the boys. She had long wavy hair and dark skin; she was a mixed girl, and had the best of both worlds. She was in Blakely and Tamara's boat; her parents were divorced. Our father met her mother at the local laundromat. Dad was repairing some washing machine parts, a side job he kept as a mechanic, when Samira's mother tripped over his tool belt. Dad found her pretty. She was elegant in work clothes, having come home from the job to find her washer broken. Dad said he could fix that, too. He showed up with dinner and flowers. She was impressed. He fixed her washer, whatever was broken, and he fixed her broken life. Alisa's husband, Samira's father, was hard core and determined. Alisa grew tired and wanted to live a little. Take the edge off with someone less severe and that's where Dad was good. Michael Allen O'Connor was calm and relaxed; too chill for a mother who wanted to party. Samira grew to like Dad; she called him Mr. Mike and later *my second dad*, though he wouldn't become her stepdad for five years. Alisa was beautiful and strong. She was thin and taller than most women at six feet with slender long legs and a

perfectly flat stomach. Dad was six-foot-one and they saw eye-to-eye. Alisa was well-kempt and worked in sales; she was a service writer for a high-end car dealer. She sold Porsches, Bentleys and Volvos. She dabbled in real estate, and her first sale was a million bucks. She had money. Dad had talent; eventually, he would build their first home with his own hands. Alisa had an eye for nice things and decorated well. Blakely and I would be out of high school by then, but Samira and Blakely would at times forget their relations and let out a slip-of-the-tongue. *She's always spending money*, Blakely said once, and Samira slit her eyes and Tamara sighed. They did, back then, have one another's back. Back then. That's when things were normal. It was normal for Blakely to sit between Tamara's legs on an amusement ride because it was summer and the local carnival had come to town.

It was the summer of the new millennium when Blakely wore her cut-off shorts and hoodie despite the ninety-degree temperature. She'd rather sweat than not look cute. Tamara was more practical in a tank. The boys wanted Blakely; Tamara would slit her own eyes then. Blakely would flirt. She had a perfect tummy and a full body; she bloomed early. Tamara took her by the hand and they went to the Gravitron where another girl would puke. They lost their appetite and found funnel cake looked eerily similar. They laughed. I told them I'd pick them up at nine ... it was only seven, and I spotted them from the Ferris wheel. Adam rolled his eyes.

"At least she's not letting them hang out," he said, and I slapped the back of his head.

“What?” he said and then laughed.

My sister was full-figured and very beautiful. I liked it better when she was shyer, less heavy on the makeup. When it was less cause for concern in the way of boys. But back then, before her lashing-out at the girl, Kennedy, who called them ugly, she was practically suicidal; the girls at her school were brutal. Back then it was a struggle. I was in high school and couldn't always defend her – she needed to find her own way. And she did. She found her voice the day they called Tamara ugly.

The carnival was a teen's outlet from school. They rode rides that made them dizzy. When the nausea wore off, they ate pizza and shared a cola. It was hot. It was summer and in three months they would enter high school, but Blakely hadn't broken the news to Tamara yet. Tamara was a poor farm girl who lived in a three-room shack and Blakely and I didn't fare too well beyond that. We lived in a modest house with three bedrooms, one bath, and old wooden floors that showed the marks since 1937 when it was built. It's another reason Tamara and Blakely lived on love. They had each other. I had Adam, but Blakely also had me. I had Blakely too, but Adam loved her as if she were his own little sister. The four of us had each other, even if she was younger. Tamara's brothers were always on her side, too. When the hatred grew, they kept their distance. The tables turned and it seemed nothing would be the same anymore. Tamara met Alisa and Samira – she told us no one could replace her love for her own father, but Dad was right up there on her list of people to buy gifts for Christmas. When things

went south, so did Tamara's love for the family. The gist is in the beginning of these pages. The rest is the story and the end is hard, rough, rugged and raw (even complex) emotion. Time is all that can heal the pain, and time is not kind, and life can be unfair and unjust. I'll tell the story and let you decide.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Candace Meredith earned her Bachelor of Science degree in English Creative Writing from Frostburg State University in the spring of 2008. Her works of poetry, photography and fiction have appeared in literary journals *Bittersweet*, *The Backbone Mountain Review*, *The Broadkill Review*, *In God's Hands/ Writers of Grace*, *A Flash of Dark*, *Greensilk Journal*, *Saltfront*, *Mojave River Press and Review*, *Scryptic Magazine*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *The Sirens Call*, *The Great Void*, *BAM Writes*, *Foreign Literary*, *Lion and Lilac Magazine*, *The Green Shoe Sanctuary Literary Journal*, *Setu Magazine* and various others. Candace lives in Virginia with her son and her daughter, her newborn baby and fiancé. She earned her Master of Science degree in Marketing and Communications from West Virginia University. Candace is the author of various books titled *Contemplation: Imagery, sound and Form in Lyricism* (a collection of poetry), *Losing You* (a novella collection), *Winter Solstice* (book 1 of a 4-book series): *The Crone* (book 2), *The Lady of Brighton* (book 3), *Summer Solstice* (book 4 in progress) and her recently published first children's books *A-Hoy Frankie Your Riverboat Captain!* And *Matilda Gets Adopted*.