



**pretty
like
us**

CAROL LYNCH WILLIAMS

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A black and white photograph of a vintage car, possibly a 1950s Ford, floating on a body of water. The car is illuminated, with its headlights and grille clearly visible. The background is a dark night sky filled with numerous stars and a large, bright full moon in the upper right corner. The overall mood is romantic and nostalgic.

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*To Alane Ferguson,
my sister*

chapter 1

Beauty,” Grandma called from the kitchen. “Quit staring at yourself and get on down here to breakfast.” “I’m not staring at myself,” I hollered back. “I’m getting ready for school.”

Don’t think about school, I whispered. Just get ready and don’t think about it.

I leaned closer to the mirror and applied a bit more mascara. I’d sneaked a tube off Momma’s dresser on account of it being the first day of sixth grade. I already had a couple of strikes against me, and light-colored eyelashes didn’t need to be another.

Momma called up the stairs next. “Baby, you gotta hurry yourself on down here. Breakfast is getting cold. You do wanna eat, don’t you?”

“You can do this, Beauty,” I told my reflection. I blinked into the mirror. The mascara made it look like spiders were

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crawling around my eyeballs. I don't ever wear makeup. But today was going to be different. It *had* to be.

I needed a song to spur me on. I write songs all the time for special occasions like this. The words usually come to me with no trouble, but to make things simpler I always use the tune to "On Top of Old Smoky."

*It is Wednesday morning,
The first day of school.
I'll meet all my good friends...*

I couldn't finish. My knees went weak for a second, and I let the sink hold me up.

"Don't think of what's coming, Miss Pretty Is," I said to the mirror.

Now I sounded just like Grandma. "Pretty is as pretty diz," she always says. It's our family motto, Great-Granny Dorothy Lu Lu's version of "Pretty is as pretty does." And according to my mother and grandmother, I am the spitting image of my great-grandmother, right down to the light-colored eyelashes and the shyness gene.

The yummy smell of breakfast made its way into our bathroom. Momma wants to open her own restaurant here in Green River some day. And she can, she's such a great cook. But on this particular morning, biscuit smells and nerves mixed around in my tummy, making me feel queasy.

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Reaching around under the sink, I found the hair dryer. I turned it on and waved it in front of the door, trying to blow the odors out into the hall.

When I turned back to the mirror, I noticed that the mascara had smeared. "Great. Just great," I said. "I can't even put mascara on right." I'd jabbed myself in the eyeball twice already and now this. I put down the hair dryer and grabbed a Q-tip. The dryer blew hot air into the daisy shower curtain. It billowed inwards, exposing the claw feet on the bathtub. I managed to clean off most of the smudges under my eyes. I had to Be Perfect today. I had to Do Better this year.

If I could make just one good friend, I thought, that will be enough to get me through sixth grade.

Wait. Make a friend? Not be afraid? Not be shy?

That was a joke. Forget doing anything different with my hair or my eyelashes. Or even wearing the new clothes I picked out just for today. A wave of despair washed over me.

I turned off the hair dryer and started downstairs, one slow step at a time.

"Beauty?" Grandma said. "Hurry in here."

Hearing her call out my name again made me cringe. I have plenty of other problems, but my biggest disadvantage in the whole wide world is my name. I mean to say, I am not Beauty from *Beauty and the Beast*, and my life is not a fairy tale. But sure enough, my name is Beauty McElwrath.

The aroma of biscuits and sausage gravy and coffee met me

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at the bottom of the stairs. “Just a sec,” I said as I turned toward the front door instead of the kitchen. Maybe a little morning air would settle my stomach and give me the courage to go to school.

My only friend *had* been Cody Nelson. He didn’t seem to care about my name at all. Things between us had been fine. Then he saw I was getting bosoms and that was the last of him.

“Beauty, y-you’re...” he’d said, staring right at my chest. “You, know, getting...stuff.”

I’d said, “Yeah, so what?” and crossed my arms. It’s not like his announcement was news to me. *I’d* noticed already.

Then he’d said, “I didn’t think...”

Then I’d said, “You didn’t think what? That I’m a girl?”

Then he’d said, “I gotta go.”

That was at the beginning of summer, almost three months ago, and we hadn’t done a thing together since.

As if I could help the bosoms, or stop them from appearing. As if I even wanted them.

I stood looking out through the lace curtain that covers the glass of our front door. All I could see through the white threads was a fuzzy pattern of trees and yard and driveway.

Things were going to be the way they’d always been, I just knew it. Me all alone with my silly name, watching people from the sidelines. And our family motto wouldn’t help me any, either. I might be pretty, like Momma and Grandma always said. And I might act good and kind, like they said I should.

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But none of that gave me friends, which made school awful lonely.

A big ol' glob of sadness made tears come to my eyes, but I didn't let myself cry. I didn't want to face Momma and Grandma with black streaks running down my face. I swallowed, then made my way back to the kitchen without getting even one breath of air.

Flash!

"Got you!" Grandma said, waving a camera. "I was wondering if you'd ever make it down here. Give me a hug." She held her arms out and I walked straight into them. She smelled of morning yard work.

"Geez, Grandma," I said. "You're choking the life out of me." I squinched my eyes closed and watched the greenish-colored dots drifting out into the space behind my eyelids. This was where I belonged. Right here in the kitchen with my family. I kissed Grandma's face and padded over to the stove where Momma stood in her blue Dickie's Gas and Other Services coveralls. "Morning," I said.

Momma turned around. "You," she said pointing with a greasy metal spatula, "are as pretty as a new dawn. Mommy, did you get a good shot of these sparkling eyes? Eyes with mascara on them." Momma let out a whistle and I ducked my head.

"Yes, sir, I sure did." Grandma kept snapping photos left and right, pushing her long hair over her shoulder so it wouldn't get in front of the lens.

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The three of us McElwraths look a lot alike. Same thick honey-colored hair, same blue eyes, same dash of freckles across the nose. In fact, once when the three of us were standing in line at the WalMart cash register, the clerk asked if we were sisters. But we differ in one important area: My momma and my grandma can talk to anybody in the whole world and it doesn't scare them a bit. Momma was even on the six o'clock news one time—being interviewed by a TV crew about a seven-foot rattlesnake she shot out back of Dickie's Gas and Other Services. And she wasn't nervous at all.

But me? Tell me to ask someone directions to the Flying Burger in Cocoa Beach or inform the librarian that we're sorry our books are two weeks late and I can feel my heart hammering right behind my nostrils. And sweat? I swear, I can feel the sweat right now just thinking about it.

Whoever heard of being like that at the age of twelve?

"Turn around so I can see all of you," Momma said, swirling her spatula in the air.

"Yes, ma'am." I tried to sound grumpy, but I couldn't. Instead, I spun in my new faded blue jeans and pink top with the glitter heart that Momma and I bought with Grandma's extra discount from working as a cashier at the Shop-For-Less.

Pop! Pop! Pop! went the camera again.

"That should about do it," Grandma said at last. "Thirty-six photos of my grandbaby's first day in sixth grade. These are going to be great."

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“Sit down, Beauty, so I can feed you,” Momma said, smashing a kiss into my temple. She set a plate of cheesy biscuits and a pan of sausage gravy on the yellow gingham tablecloth. As she poured orange juice in my cup, a patch of sunshine landed on the glass pitcher, making it look like a sunrise. “Now fill up that plate and eat, Baby, so you can learn all there is to learn today.”

I sat down and said a little prayer in my heart. *Beauty, you're as ready as you'll ever be. This year you're going to do it. You're going to find yourself a true friend.*

And in spite of the shaking in my knees and the way my left eye kept twitching, I believed every word.