



First There was Bird

BY LINDA OATMAN HIGH

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INTERIOR ILLUSTRATED BY LEO TRINIDAD



Egremont, Massachusetts



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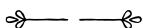
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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1:	Who's a Pretty Girl?	1
CHAPTER 2:	Long Line of Beauty Queens	7
CHAPTER 3:	First, Second, Third Bird.	15
CHAPTER 4:	Cars Can Be Replaced.	22
CHAPTER 5:	Hair is Hair.	37
CHAPTER 6:	What-Ifs at Night	41
CHAPTER 7:	Angry Rainy Morning	45
CHAPTER 8:	Jeremiah Jeremiah	49
CHAPTER 9:	No ESP with Felines.	55
CHAPTER 10:	Mississippi Bird.	59
CHAPTER 11:	Eli Whitney	64
CHAPTER 12:	Breaking into Church	74
CHAPTER 13:	Kraemer's Feed Mill	83
CHAPTER 14:	Polly's Precious Pets.	87
CHAPTER 15:	Mama Spazzes Out.	91
CHAPTER 16:	Ghost of Babette Bailey.	97
CHAPTER 17:	Secret Place	102
CHAPTER 18:	Daddy's Story	107
CHAPTER 19:	A Business Plan.	112
CHAPTER 20:	Another Salon Surprise.	122
CHAPTER 21:	Who's a Pretty Girl?	129



Dedication: For Wayne Yonce: “First there was Bird,
then there was Bird-Bird . . .” Rest in peace with birdsong,
sweet Southern gentleman.

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Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Jeff Anderson, Heather Miller, and Lola Schaefer,
my writing buddies at the cabin retreat in the
Carolina mountains.

And for Marty Crisp, my BFF of more than 30 years,
who flew far as birds can fly on December 29th, 2024.
I promise to keep on writing, Mart, and I will find you
in the Afterworld.



CHAPTER 1

Who's a Pretty Girl?

It's finally the first day of summer vacation, but this means that I have to ride my bike past the cemetery—the Restful Souls Cemetery—to get to my brand-new job. There is no other way to get there from here.

I pedal as fast as I can, feet circling, wind tangling my hair and sunshine glaring rudely in my face. I zoom past Restful Souls, squinting, bent forward. On purpose, I do not turn my head to look at those gravestones. *I will not look, I will not look, I'll never look.*

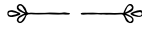
I didn't look on the day that Daddy was buried here, either. On that day, that bad, bad day, I stayed huddled in the car, parked in the heat over at the Fill It Up gas station. When I think about it, I can still smell the gasoline fumes from that day. I can feel the heat like fire, my heart melting into hot ashes of

shock, the flame searing my face when I tried to look at a world without him. It was like there was a father-shaped hole in the universe, all filled up with gasoline and fire. And it's still smoldering.

One of these days, now that I'm almost twelve, I do plan to visit Daddy's grave. I really do. But first, I have to get brave. That's what it's going to take. A big heaping scoop of being brave.

Whew! The Restful Souls Cemetery is behind me now, and I'm pedaling slow and relaxed down Main Street. There's Polly's Precious Pets and the hardware store and the bank and the post office. Rank's restaurant and the feed mill and the bar and the church, where the sign in-between says TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH. And just past the church, with its pointy steeple and stained glass and hopeful flower-lined paths, there it is—Mama's salon. Delilah's Delightful Hair, Nails, Teeth, and Tans, the purple and pink painted salon that my Mama owns. It was once a library, believe it or not, and if you ask me, that building was better off filled with books.

Now it's all about ladies who mostly only care about how they look.



I park my bike just off the sidewalk under the magnolia tree that I'm named after, with its huge green leaves and sweet-smelling flowers. I feel as if I'm forgetting something, and I pat the pockets of my bib overall shorts. I have my house key. I have chewing gum to freshen my breath for the salon ladies. *What am I forgetting?* I can feel it in my gut, like something's missing, or lost, or not quite right.

Ever since Daddy died, my fiery insides are tied into this big knot of emptiness. That includes my head and my heart and every other part. It's like I'm forgetting something, but I don't quite know what. Mama doesn't help anything, always nagging me about beauty and hair and stuff. Plus, my best friend Emma moved to Pennsylvania in December. I don't know how much more I can take, people leaving me and all that. I've decided not to get attached to human beings anymore.

And now here I am—my first day employed in the salon. Daddy would have a conniption fit, as he was all about brains over beauty. He used to call me his “little genius tomboy girl.” Daddy and I had a lot in common; we both liked adventure, fun, and being outside.

I give my bike one last glance, and head inside Delilah's, where everybody gawks when somebody comes in the door.

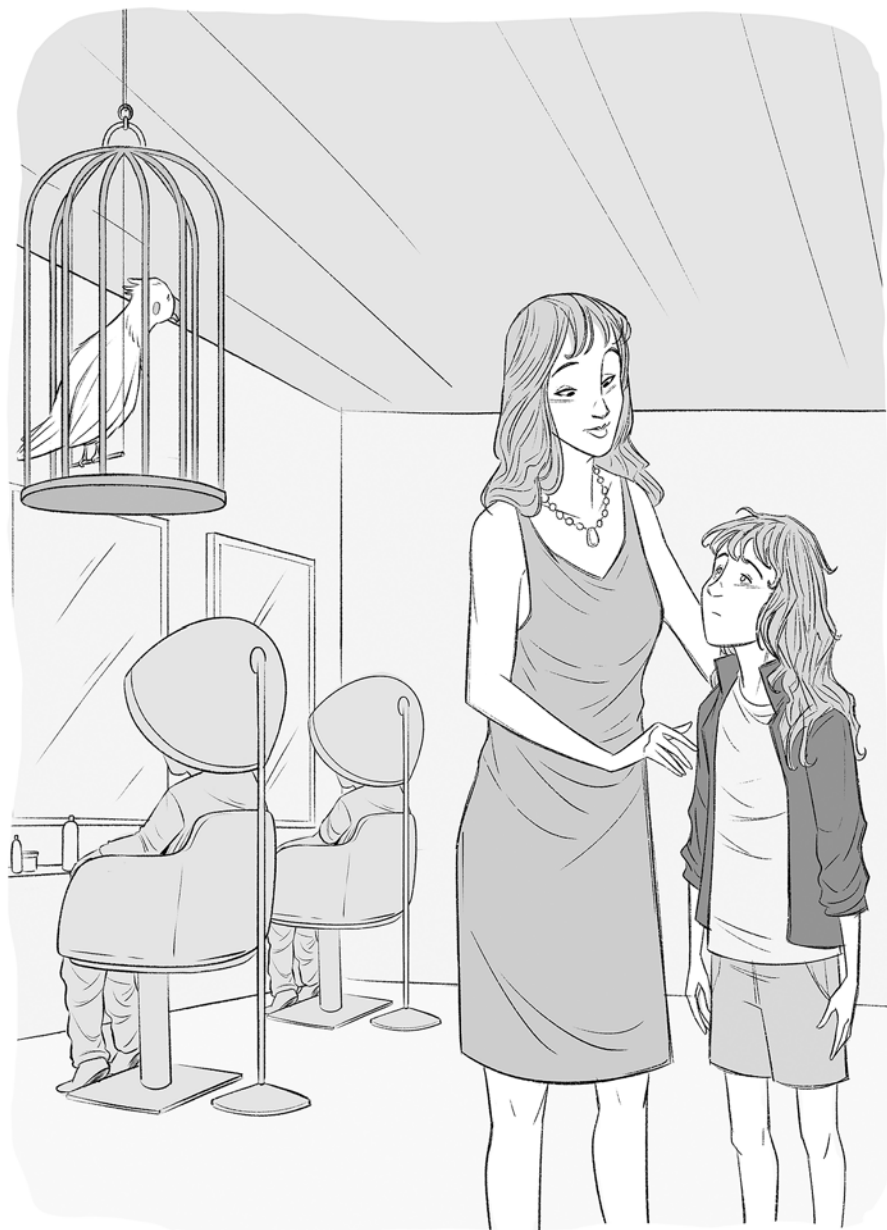
"Pretty girl! Pretty girl! Who's a pretty girl?" That's our cockatiel, Third Bird, chirping out his usual greeting. He says it for boys and girls, ladies and men. Funny thing is, all the salon ladies think it's meant especially for them.

"Hi, Third Bird," I say. I go to his cage on the counter and make little kissy noises at him.

Mama is painting her own nails. Three of the usual crew of nosy nagging ladies that I call my "Extra Mothers" sit under hair dryers. There's the whirr of the dryers, the hot hair smell in the air, the reek of the tanning bed. The smell of chemicals—hair spray and fake color and perm solution. A person could get lung cancer just from breathing the air in here.

"Magnolia, darlin'," Mama calls. "You're three minutes late. Try to be on time tomorrow. And just look at your hair! Honey, run a brush through that mess!"

I ignore her, focusing on Third Bird instead.



“Pretty girl! Pretty girl! Who’s a pretty girl?” chirps Third Bird again. He says this in my Daddy’s voice, which creeps me out but also comforts me every time. Daddy taught him to say this, right before he died four years ago, and my smart little cockatiel never forgot Daddy’s raspy voice. Neither have I.

“Magnolia’s a pretty girl,” Mama calls to Third Bird. “It’s just that she doesn’t know it yet. If only she’d let me do something with that hair.”

Third Bird ruffles his feathers in response. He’s so beautiful with soft gray and blazes of white on the wings, a yellow face and crest, and two bright splotches of orange where his cheeks would be. Third Bird always looks like he went a little wild with Dollar Store blush. When he’s in a relaxed state of mind, like now, his feathery yellow head crest is tilted a little bit off-kilter.

“Pretty girl,” he says again. “Pretty girl.”

I wink at him. He winks back, I swear. We have an understanding, Third Bird and me.



CHAPTER 2

Long Line of Beauty Queens

“So, big congratulations on your new job, Magnolia!” Mama says, clapping her hands carefully and without a sound, so as not to mess up her fresh just-painted red nails.

“Hooray for my girl!” Mama shouts, and the ladies all look at me. I sink a little lower inside myself. Unlike my Mama, The Beauty Queen, I do not like extra attention.

“Thanks, Mama. But I don’t know if I really want a job. All it means is that I have to get up early. Be here at Delilah’s Delightful Hair, Nails, Teeth, and Tans every single weekday morning from nine to noon. I could be sleeping instead, or swimming, or getting some fresh air. Taking a vacation. It is summertime, you know.”

“Or wasting an entire day in the branches of a

tree, reading some book,” Mama replies. “And, hello, Magnolia? *Ka-ching!* A job means money! Money to buy yourself more books! Plus, it looks good on your resume!”

I’m eleven! I don’t have a resume. When you’ve won a baby beauty pageant and you’re named for the flower of the state of you live in, people expect way too much of you.

You see, I come from a long line of beauty queens.

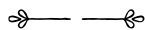
First, there was my great-grandmother—Mrs. Mississippi 1956.

Then, my granny became Miss Mississippi 1976.

Mama was Miss Magnolia, 1996.

Then I was crowned Tiny Miss Magnolia of Murdock, Mississippi. *Big whoop-de-doo.* It’s splattered all over the internet, which is mortifying beyond belief. Daddy didn’t like it one bit, either.

I was practically a baby, and so it wasn’t my choice. I guess I should have been crowned Miss Beauty Queen Against My Will.



Mama slicks her lips with red, turns them under her teeth, and then releases them with a little *pop*. She

smiles at herself in the mirror, slipping the lipstick into the pocket of her pink smock.

“I wish you’d let me help you with just a little touch of makeup,” Mama says.

“I am eleven,” I say. “I do not wear makeup.”

“Soon to be twelve!” Mama declares. She pats her stomach. “Boy, do I remember that day, your birthday, just like it was yesterday. You were such a gorgeous baby.”

I am not in the mood for tales of my babyhood, so I change the subject. I’m an expert at that.

“I feel like I’m wasting my entire summer.” I look through the front window at my bike, waiting patiently by the tree.

“Be thankful for a job,” Mama says.

I ignore her. I’m an expert at that, too.

“Not everybody has a job in this downturned economy,” Mama goes on. “You are so lucky, Magnolia!”

“Three hours a day of trying to learn the fine fake arts of hair dye, nail color, teeth whitening, and skin darkening. *Bor-ring.*”

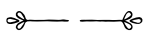
My beauty queen Mama obviously does not agree. She loves all the stuff that beauty can buy. She used

money from her pageants to buy this salon, and it was the money from the salon that bought us our house. And now, even in what Mama keeps calling “this downturned economy,” we are still raking in the dough here at Delilah’s.

“Delilah, I’d like to make a tanning appointment for tomorrow morning,” one of the ladies calls out.

You would think that people who live in the South wouldn’t need tanning beds, it being sunny and hot here most of the time. But obviously they do. Mama’s salon’s been real busy since she added teeth and tans to her repertoire.

Maybe I am needed to help out, but I’d rather be home. We just got a new trampoline and an X-Box game system. If only I had some friends, we could have a lot of fun at my house.



For this first day at the salon, Mama already told me that I’m on tanning bed duty. This means that I have to spray down the glass after naked ladies have been in there sweating like stuck pigs.

“Here, put on your smock,” Mama says. She hands me a girly pink smock. This thing totally covers up

the real me in my favorite shorts and T-shirt. At least Mama is allowing me to wear my *real* shoes—orange Converse high tops.

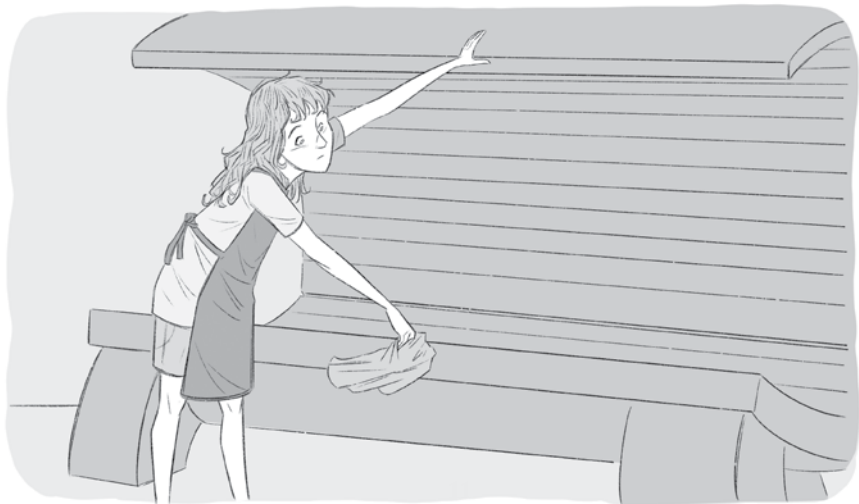
“Okay,” Mama says. “Tanning room number two is ready for cleaning.”

I go and fetch the spray bottle and a roll of paper towels. The smock swishes as I walk.

“Get it squeaky-clean,” Mama says.

I swear, she’s even bossier at the salon than she is at home.

“I don’t know if all this is worth twenty dollars a day,” I mutter, swishing into tanning room number two. It smells weird in here—baked lady flesh—and the room is much too hot. The electric fan at the foot is blowing that stink right toward my face. *Ewww!*



“Make sure you get that tanning bed good and clean, Magnolia,” calls old Mrs. Jones from under her hairdryer. “Germs are just crawling all over those tanning beds. Don’t want to be spreading sickness all around town.”

I always ignore the Extra Mothers. One mother is enough for me. And anyway, they’re all crazy.

Who’d want to waste a beautiful summer’s morning sitting in a room reeking of hair color, nail polish, and sweat? Not me, that’s for sure. Sunshiny blue-sky days like this are made for being outdoors.

I clean the top and bottom halves of the tanning bed, making sure not to touch the icky glass with my bare hand. *Gross!*

I don’t know who’d want to be in one of these glass caskets anyway, letting bright white light burn you to a crisp. This bed is still warm, which is extra-gross, and it makes this strange ticking noise as it cools.

I take a breath and hold it until I get out of there. *Whew!*

“Pretty girl, pretty girl. Who’s a pretty girl? Who’s a pretty girl?” chirps Third Bird.

I swish to the front counter, and pump hand sanitizer, rubbing my palms together to kill the germs

of baked ladies. Then I go to the bird cage, unlatching the little wire door and giving Third Bird some seed. We get the expensive kind of bird seed, because the world's finest cockatiel deserves only the best.

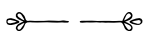
Third Bird pecks at his food, and a new customer walks in the door.

"I'm here for highlighting," the lady says. Mama shows her to her seat. She gets out the hair color and the fat paintbrush and the squares of aluminum foil. She begins mixing the color as the lady studies herself in the mirror.

Stuck on that mirror, right above the lady's face, is a bumper sticker with Mama's favorite saying—*American by birth, Southern by the grace of God.*

Mama's salon includes a lot of religious quotes. See, my mama is president of the Ladies Club of the Delta Baptist Church.

"I not only make everybody in town look their best," she always says, "but I save their insides, too!"



Mama starts painting that lady's hair, and her eyes meet mine in the mirror. "Surprise, Magnolia," she says. "There aren't any more tanning appointments

this morning, so you can go and enjoy your first day of summer vacation. You're free, sweet pea."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

I shrug off the pink smock and hustle out of the stinky salon and into the fresh-smelling day. It's a morning like a soap commercial—all bird-chirpy and flowery with a little breeze swishing through green leaves.

But then there's a dainty scream—a squeal from Mama—and a flap of wings near my ears as I head out the door.

"The bird!" Mama yells. "His cage wasn't latched right! Get him, Magnolia!"

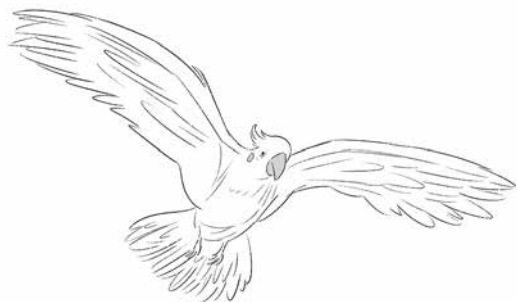
"Third Bird!" I yell, stretching my hands into the sky. But Third Bird just flies, and flies, until he disappears. My heart falls.

"Come back!" I shriek.

"Third Bird! Get back here!"

But he's gone.

Third Bird is gone.





Linda Oatman High is the author of more than 25 books for children and teens, with many of her books winning awards and honors. Linda's writing awards include the 2017 Ross Legal

Fiction writing contest from the American Bar Association, as well as the prestigious international shortlist of six for the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award. Linda holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College, and she is also a journalist/playwright/poet. Recent publications include *Somebody's Someone*. Linda lives and writes in central Pennsylvania.



Leo Trinidad is a New York Times bestselling illustrator and animator from Costa Rica. Leo is known for being the creator of the first animated series ever produced in Central America. For more

than 15 years, he's been creating content for children's books and TV shows. His short form series have aired in more than 40 territories around the world on channels like Disney and Cartoon Network.



“Kate DiCamillo (*Because of Winn Dixie*) meets
Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*).

Dazzling and thoroughly readable. This tale of hard-won
belonging proves there’s a place in the heart for everyone.”

–*Marty Crisp*, author of *White Star: A Dog on the Titanic* and
Private Captain: A Story of Gettysburg

“*First There Was Bird* lets loose a menagerie of
colorful characters! A delightful, funny and
heartwarming story of a girl’s search for a bird and
her discovery of friendship and forgiveness.”

–*A. B. Westrick*, author of *Brotherhood*

“If you were a runaway cockatiel, where would you go?”

It’s a fair question . . . but not a very common one!

In *First There Was Bird*, it is the journey—not the
destination—that counts. Readers will be enthralled
as they follow the zig-zagging paths of delightful characters
such as Magnolia, Delilah, Jeremiah and Violet who, in their
quest to find a lost pet, discover community, friendship, and a
deeper understanding of themselves.”

–*Jen Bryant*, Sibert Medal winner, author of *Pieces of Georgia*,
The Trial, and *Ringside 1925*.



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