

# SOMEBODY'S SOMEONE



BY LINDA OATMAN HIGH

ILLUSTRATED BY YAYIRA DZAMESI

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**BY LINDA OATMAN HIGH**  
**ILLUSTRATED BY YAYIRA DZAMESI**



Egremont, Massachusetts



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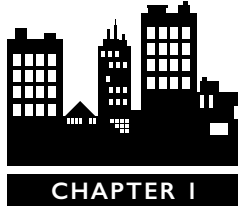
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FOR ZACH



## SHE'S SOMEBODY'S SOMEONE

The latest Missing poster for my Mama goes like this, and it's almost like a poem. A sad, sad poem.

### MISSING

**Ruthie May Simpson-Bean**

Age 33

5'9"; ranges 120-225 pounds

Ruthie has blue eyes and a tattoo

Of a forest of green trees

On her right arm.

Her hair was blonde, but it could now

be black or brown

or rainbow or red, short or long

or maybe shaved.

Ruthie plays

Guitar and harmonica,

And her singing voice  
Sounds like Sheryl Crow.  
She was last seen in Deep Creek,  
Georgia; Route 73.  
She may be heading for Pennsylvania  
or Mountain Lane, West Virginia  
or Los Angeles, California.  
Ruthie has asthma and addictions  
and mental health problems.  
She does not have her medication.  
If you see her, please be patient.  
She may talk a lot  
Or she may be quiet and scared.  
She might try to run.  
Please call the Little Creek Police Department  
immediately.  
She is somebody's someone,  
and we love her very much.

There are two pictures of Mama on that poster.  
The picture on the left is from one of her Good Days,  
where she's all shiny and smiling, looking like the  
world's not an impossible and heartbreaking place.

The right picture is the newer one, and she looks

rough . . . about a hundred years older after a lifetime of being tired. She looks like the entire earth crushed her in from all sides like a trash compactor, and then just spit her out, all alone, into outer space.

Mama always says she feels like an alien among human beings, like ET from some old movie. She quotes that ET character: “I’ll be back. Home. I’ll be right here.” She then points her finger at my heart.

*I’ll be right here.*

We always write the Missing posters as if we assume that she’ll be gone a long time, because she might. Sometimes she gains or loses weight; sometimes she cuts or grows her hair. Sometimes she colors it a brand-new shade.

But she’s always the same. She’s always my Mama, and she always has her issues, and that will probably never change.





We're hanging this missing poster on the bulletin board in Salon *Artiste*, as if these ladies care about anybody other than themselves. It smells like chemicals and selfishness in here: expensive shampoos and nail polish and hair dye. Ladies gawk at themselves in mirrors, yakking away about things that don't matter. And here we are, my aunt and me: thumbtacking our whole world up on a board of holey cork, in between things like a refrigerator for sale and free kittens.

If only some people had a clue about what other people might be dealing with, just a comb's throw away, maybe they'd stop their gossiping long enough to care about somebody other than themselves.

I reach out a finger and gently touch the best picture of Mama; the one where she's in a Good Days phase. I touch that picture like it's a good-luck charm, or the magic to bring her back. I touch her carefully as if she's a thin piece of glass or an egg I don't want to crack, which is kind of like how we deal with Mama in normal daily life. *Cautiously.*

Aunt Marion sighs.

"We'll find her, Ruby. We always do, right?"

Aunt Marion rubs my arm, as we stand there in front of this poster that includes everything.

I take a deep breath and shrug, pulling my hand away from the picture and chewing on a fingernail. I can touch that paper all I want, but it's not like touching Mama. That's the problem with posters of Missing People. There's no breath or heartbeat or voice or warm skin, just words and ink and hope on paper.

My Aunt Marion makes the posters when Mama goes missing and she also takes care of me. Well, actually, she takes care of me even when Mama's *not* missing, on account of the fact that I'm only twelve and supposedly can't take care of myself.

We print up the posters and we hang them all over the place, advertising my Mama's problems for the whole town to see. We wait seven days and then we do it. We post on Facebook, and then we hope that somebody reading the Missing and Homeless in America page might see Mama somewhere. Anywhere.

"We need to keep the faith, Ruby," Aunt Marion always says, pressing her hand to her heart as if love can bring Mama back. "All we can do is hope and pray. Giving up is not an option."

Aunt Marion's soft face sags pale as a wrinkled

bedsheet and her eyes swim tired with tiny red lines like an old road map, which makes it appear to me as if she's running short on faith herself. So, I try to keep upbeat, giving my aunt the kind of smile you do when actually you'd much rather cry until the end of time. Having a missing and sick mother isn't exactly fun.

Here's the thing: I have to explain over and over. I explain to teachers and kids and counselors and preachers and people on the streets who are wondering about Mama.

“She has a brain disease, and that's something she just can't help. Her brain makes her do things just to try to feel better, and so sometimes she puts things in her body that actually make it worse. When she disappears, she's trying to run away from that disease. She's not running away from me. This is something that is out of her control and it's out of mine, too. Her brain makes her believe things that aren't true . . . but they are true to her.”

Aunt Marion taught me this little spiel. I know it by heart.

Mama's disease might be called bipolar or schizophrenia or schizo-affective disorder. Depression and anxiety and substance-use disorder. Those are all

big and confusing words that the doctors and hospitals use to try to explain this mess. They also throw out initials like PTSD and ADHD and OCD, as if using abbreviations might make it easier.

So, anyway, those initials and that brain disease have struck again . . . *boom*. She has good days and she has bad days and sometimes those days turn into weeks and months.

And now here we are in the month of May, same as Mama's middle name, and she's been gone for seven days. An entire week: Missing Person Poster Time.

Last time she went missing, it was *nine months*, and we found her in Los Angeles, California, after somebody took a picture of her sleeping in the street and put it on the Facebook page. Mama's tall and one-of-a-kind; we'd recognize that body and face anywhere, no matter what the weight.

When she's "stable" (meaning halfway between the good and the bad), she gains about a hundred pounds from her medicine and she sleeps, like, all the time. In my mind, I call her Mama Zombie when she's in her stable glazed-eye periods. That's when she stares a lot and takes a while to answer questions, looking as if she's a million miles away from the rest of us.

Mama thought she was a movie star that time she ran to LA. She believed that some actor whispered a secret to her through the TV: that she needed to head to the Hollywood Hills and become rich and famous and beautiful like she'd been born to be.

And so she went, wearing these big purple sunglasses and a glittery red dress that lost its sequins and eventually fell to pieces. She went missing and she stayed missing for nine whole months, which is the same amount of time that she kept me in her belly before I was born.

I wish I still lived in there, so that we'd always be together. I wish she didn't have this stupid brain disease, that I had a magic wand that would take it away and make her better. I even wish that I could take her sickness away from her and into myself, sometimes, but Aunt Marion says that's a crazy wish. One that I should not entertain, because "be careful what you wish for, Ruby."

But I wonder all the time about how it would feel to be Mama from the inside-out.

More than anything, I wish for her to come back, to come home where she belongs.

Like the poster says, she's somebody's someone.

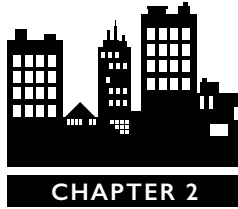
She's my mother and she's Aunt Marion's sister and she's Grammy and Pop's little girl and sometimes she's Mason Gordon's girlfriend.

And I'd never say this to Aunt Marion, but I consider the worst possibilities all the time, and those thoughts are like killer turkey buzzards inside of my heart, pecking away at my shriveled little bit of hope and my shaky faith every single minute of every single day that Mama is gone.

*What if she's hurt? What if she's cold? What if she's hungry? What if she's crying and afraid, missing us, too? What if she's confused? What if she doesn't know what to do?*

What if we never find her?

What if . . . this time . . . she's gone . . . forever?



## EVERYTHING WAS FINE UNTIL IT WASN'T

Outside of the beauty salon, birds chirp and the sun shines and the sky floats warm and peaceful like a blue ceiling in a big, shared house meant to keep everybody safe and happy. Flowers and trees are doing their usual thing: just hanging out looking all beautiful and colorful and green, as if the world in May is a pretty place where nothing ever goes wrong.

These flowers and trees are so clueless.

Whenever things aren't going so good, I always wonder: How can everything look so normal, even when it's *not*?

"Everything was fine until it wasn't," Aunt Marion says when explaining the history of Mama's sickness.

Apparently, my mother was always a little bit wild and rebellious, breaking rules and having no fear and

laughing hysterically and all that fun stuff that makes grown-up people your favorites. She had me and she was a fine mother, Aunt Marion says.

“The sun rose and set upon you. You were her world. She said it was like having Christmas every day, when she woke up and looked at you in your little crib by her bed.”

In a nutshell, that’s the Story Of Me. I was born and Mama was happy, and it didn’t even matter that I had no dad in my life. Everything was fine until it wasn’t.

Aunt Marion likes to offer me what she calls “tidbits of advice,” and this is her favorite one: “You have to let go of what you can’t control, darlin’. Just live your life and try not to worry because you can’t change your Mama, anyway. Only she can change her own life. So you just worry about yourself and finding happiness every step of the way. Think about this: if your Mama fell into quicksand and she was drowning, you couldn’t save her if you jumped in and started drowning, too. Just take care of your own self, Ruby, and seek out joy wherever you can.”

Sometimes this advice makes me want to scream and other times I believe that my aunt knows what



she's talking about. After all, she's known my Mama even longer than I have.

It all started when Mama started believing that the neighbors Ed and Wanda were secretly filming our house. She thought they were somehow connected to the FBI and the CIA and the government. I was almost two when all that happened, says Aunt Marion.

“Toddling around in your own little world while your Mama went crazy,” she says. “Lucky for you: you had no idea what was going on.”

And then there were the never-ending circles of places where Mama needed to be: hospitals and rehabs and treatment centers and jails. Halfway Houses, when she was halfway between The Places and Us. She might as well be halfway between the earth and the moon, for all the good it does.

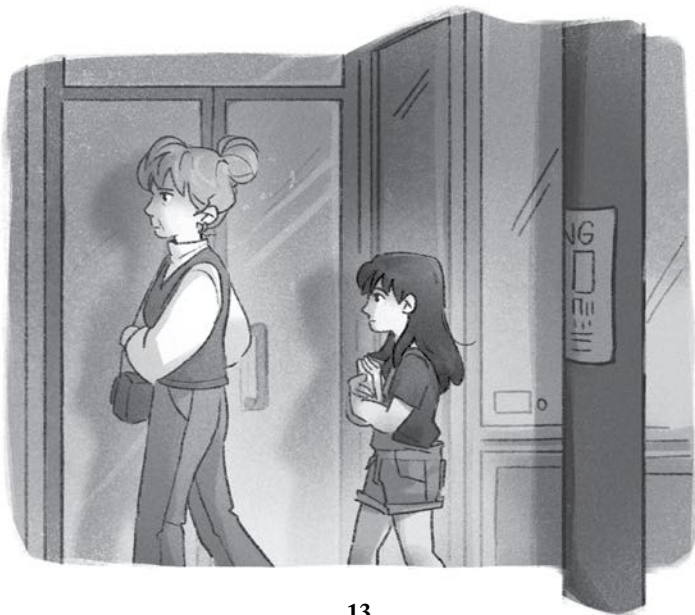
So, this is my life. This is all our lives: Mama and Aunt Marion and me, Grammy and Pop and Mason Gordon and the people who work with Mama when she keeps a job for a while. Sometimes it makes me mad: that *we* are the ones who get stuck with this stupid illness and what it does to the ones who love the sick person. What it does to *Mama*, who's such a

good lady. It's just not fair and I just get mad and I don't really care.

And today, I'm mad at those happy birds in those green trees who are chirping away without a care in the world.

*Please be quiet*, I think inside of my head, trying to be semi-polite even though I'm so angry and annoyed. Aunt Marion taught me right, I suppose. *Try to be nice. Don't say Shut Up. Mind your manners.*

Aunt Marion hands me a stack of the Missing posters. They are a super-heavy stack in my arms, but I carry them, pressing them next to my chest. I can carry heavy things. I can. I do.



And then we just head towards the next place in town where we'll hang our posters, because what else would we do? What else *could* we do?

I look down, making sure that my feet don't touch the sidewalk cracks, because a broken back is the last thing that my Mama needs in her life. With every step, the words run through my head.

*Everything was fine until it wasn't. She was here and then she was gone.*

Deep Creek, Georgia, is a tiny town squeezed in-between three creeks.

There's just one place with sidewalks: Main Street. On Main Street, there's a church and a bar and a lawyer and a diner and a beauty salon and a bakery and the police station and a garage. All the necessary places as far as adults are concerned.

Away from Main Street, it's just water and rocks and woods and the places where people live. Here's the weird thing about Deep Creek: there are rich people and there are poor people and everything in-between. Huge fancy-mansion houses next to rusted trailers, which makes me think that the big houses are making fun of the not-so-fancy ones, kind of like how some of the rich kids in school make fun of the

ones who get free lunches.

I don't know what money has to do with how good of a person you are, but there you go. Life in America, I guess. The United States of Paychecks.

Aunt Marion and Mama and I live in a tiny pinkish house that feels totally like home because this is where I was born. My grandparents live just through the trees and so does Mama's sometimes-boyfriend.

Some of the kids in school say that Deep Creek is boring and stupid and out in the middle of nowhere.

"No wonder your mother runs away," they say, making my gut clutch up.

I don't even answer, because they just don't get it no matter how much I explain the big words and the initials of the sickness. I could talk until I'm blue in the face, but those kids would just have to live it before they understand it.

And that's why I get quiet sometimes. Because kids who live in a place where homeless people do not exist will never understand. All they think is that people who use drugs and alcohol are *bad*, and that the homeless people they see on the streets in cities are *useless*. *Lazy*. *Don't want to work*. *Addicted*. *Crazy*.

But those kids have never felt my Mama's hugs

or known her big giving heart or laughed with her until they cried. They've never danced with her in the kitchen or leaped waves with her in the ocean or run with her across wet morning sand that moves beneath the feet. They've never seen Mama's swirly artwork or heard her music or read one of her poems. They've never worn crowns of flowers with her and pretended to be Queens of The World, sending out magical and majestic whistles with blades of green grass squeezed between their thumbs.

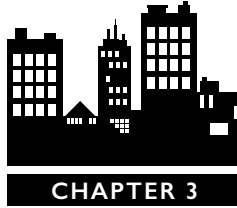
Those kids have known nothing bad, ever, I'd say. They have perfect lives, like TV families, and nobody ever gets sick or disappears.

Those kids need to leave me alone, because it's where I belong. *Alone.*

My favorite days are Saturdays and Sundays, because no school. My favorite time of the year is summer, because no school. No school equals no kids without a clue.

Luckily, it's Poster Day. Luckily, it's Saturday. Luckily, it's just me and Aunt Marion.

Not-so-luckily, my mother is gone without a trace.



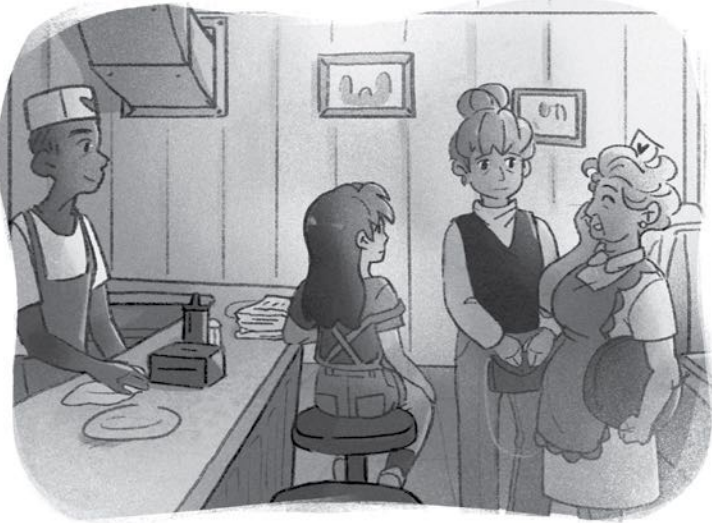
## IN THE EAT-YOUR-HEART-OUT DINER

We go into the Eat-Your-Heart-Out Diner, where it smells like bacon and eggs and pancakes and coffee, any time of the day or night. I like this place, because at least it's consistent. You always know what to expect. Breakfast 24-7.

There's a loud jokey waitress Penny and the grumpy owner Dave and the skinny guy you can see cooking in the back. He sweats and bites his lip and gazes intensely down at the grill, as if cooking is a matter of life and death. Well, maybe it is.

It's always loud and chattery with gossip, silverware clinking against plates. It's kind of the town hangout, the place where people chill because there's not much else to do. And I know that today, they must all be talking about Mama.

"Marion The Librarian!" calls out Penny, a name



that she apparently got from some old show about a music man. It works, though, because my aunt actually is a librarian at my school, where we still have a library. It's my favorite place. With books and stories, I can run away without hurting anybody. I can escape.

“And little Miss Ruby Louise, The Bee’s Knees!” I am not a fan of this nickname that Penny gives me, because bees obviously do not have knees and it makes no sense. But then again, there are many things that don’t make sense, and I just nod and accept Penny’s personality.

“Hey,” I say.

“You are getting so tall and beautiful!” says Penny.  
“You’re growing so fast!”

Why do adults always say this, as if they’re actually *surprised* that kids are growing?

“Oh, I’d give my right arm for that hair of yours. So glossy and straight and dark as night.”

Penny always raves about my hair, which is something I supposedly got from the father I never met. She talks about wanting to trade her right arm, which is kind of floppy and large and not really something I’d have any use for in my life.

“She is gorgeous,” Aunt Marion agrees. Why do grown-ups always talk about kids as if we’re not even there? *She* this, and *She* that and isn’t *She* turning into a lovely young lady?

“She’s so smart and kind, too,” says my aunt. “Best kid you’d ever want to meet. We are blessed.”

I shake my head, and try to direct the conversation away from me.

“What kind of cake do you have today?” I ask.

Penny lights up.

“Chocolate with peanut butter icing,” she announces, too loud, and I catch my breath, hoping she doesn’t say what comes next.



“Your mother’s favorite!” she says.

My heart smashes to the hard tile floor of the diner like a dropped plate.

“I’ll have cherry pie,” I say.

I’m on the last bite of pie and Aunt Marion is chatting it up with other customers. (You’d never know from her sunshiny public personality what goes on behind closed doors. Like the times she goes totally broke, trying to help my mama. Smiles and chit-chat cover up a lot, as far as my Aunt Marion is concerned.)

“Yes, the library got a grant!” she’s telling a perfumed lady, when the sweaty cook comes out of the kitchen, pushing his way like a cowboy through those swinging doors.

“Excuse me,” he says to Aunt Marion, “but I have some information that you might want to hear.”

Aunt Marion puts down her fork and her body stiffens.

The guy puts his elbows on the counter and leans forward.

“So,” he says, “the day before she went missing, Ruthie asked me to borrow money. Just twenty, she said.”

Aunt Marion waves her hand.

“What else is new? She’s always asking to borrow money.”

I stare at my plate as if it might be Mama’s face.

“Well, but then later that night my buddy Dwayne saw her at the bus station over in Amberville. Said she was hanging out with some shady-looking dude, and that she looked kind of scared or something. Like maybe something went wrong. Dwayne said she looked all spacey and out-there.”

My stomach clenches. Mama’s been known to get mixed up with the wrong people. She makes bad decisions and poor choices, like the time she met some guy online and decided to run away with him to see the mermaid show in Weeki Wachee, Florida. Turned out that the man was on the run from the law, and next thing you know Mama was all tangled up in something she didn’t intend.

“She just has no common sense,” Aunt Marion always says. “She never means any harm. Her intentions are good, and her heart is pure.”

She says it now, to the cook, who nods.

“I know, right?” he says. He’s talking quietly, which I appreciate.

“I just thought you might want to know,” he says,

nodding, “on account of how she said she had that stalker guy when she worked down at the Snacks and Stuff convenience store.”

Aunt Marion’s eyes fly open wide.

“Stalker? Ruthie has a stalker?” The cook pulls back a little. He yanks a napkin from the dispenser, and swipes sweat from his forehead (which I think might be kind of an unsanitary thing for a cook to do, but whatever).

“She didn’t tell you? You didn’t know?”

“My little sister is good at keeping secrets,” Aunt Marion says. “She’s been doing it all her life.”

“Well, there’s this dude named Burle. Been harassing her when she’s working, trying to get her out on a date and stuff like that. After she kept telling him no, he got all creeper-like, calling her and sending weird threatening texts and showing up when she was closing the store late at night. She told me about it a couple of times, when she was in here eating her lunch. It was freaking her out.”

Aunt Marion puts both hands in her hair. I twist the paper from a drinking straw into a tiny sword, stab it into my wrist.

“Well,” Aunt Marion says, “we need to find out

about this Burle. She usually hides her phone away somewhere when she leaves and doesn't want to be found. We'll find it, hopefully, and get in touch with this man."

The cook makes a fist and pounds it into an open palm.

"I'll do more than get in touch," he says. "If that dude has hurt Miss Ruthie, he's going to get a piece of me."

The cook-man strides back to the kitchen, his shoulders set like a tough guy. Aunt Marion gathers up her purse to pay for our food, and I just try to collect myself, an extra worry now added to my list.

*What if Mama's stalker took her away?*





**Linda Oatman High** is an award-winning author of books for children and teens. She also teaches writing workshops. Linda holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. Recent publications include the chapter book series **HEATHER WHIRL WEATHER GIRL**. This quirky, creative and talented writer lives in central Pennsylvania.



**Yayira Dzamesi** is an illustrator and storyteller who is passionate about stories that dive deep and push hard. Her work is marked by warm tones that both comfort and challenge readers. When not illustrating or writing, you can find Yai at home in North Carolina discussing video games with her spouse, playing with their two dogs, or sitting in wonder at the movie theater.

12-year-old Ruby Bean has become an Accidental Expert on Missing Mothers. When Ruthie, her mother, goes missing again due to mental illness and addiction, Ruby and her aunt leap into action to search for Ruthie. A jewelry store robbery and unexpected kindness from the victim bring more twists to the journey. From Georgia to Washington to New York City Ruby discovers that sometimes even the worst events can bring the best surprises into one's life.



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