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University



ETRUSCAN PRESS/WILKES UNIVERSITY
2023 Etruscan Prize Winner June 2023

Dahlia Fisher
Judged by Etruscan author Sheryl St. Germain

Stella Still Standing

Time's about half-past ten when the junkies turning tricks emerge from their mole holes to hang on the corner where the parking lot meets the stretch of double- yellow line road. Old men pull up and pretend to ask for directions as if they've gotten lost while cruising through this rundown Florida beach town. I see 'em come and go through the slats in the motel drapes.

Me and Gramma been staying at this pay-by-the-hour shithole next to the airport for over a month, which I know 'cause the front desk guy gave us an advent calendar and I eat one chocolate each day 'til Christmas. After I shovel down a cup of ramen noodle soup watching *A Christmas Story* on rerun, I open the final advent which is a chocolate shaped like baby Jesus and I realize I haven't seen Gramma since I ate the chocolate shaped like an angel on December 22.

I'm thinking I should go look for her, even though I prefer to stay inside after dark. I'm six feet tall, skinny like a skeleton with all my bones popping through my skin, and wear my hair short, so if I walk to the corner the old men confuse me for a boy who does tricks. That's the worst kind of insult: that I'm not a regular girl just 'cause I don't look like most of 'em. When I answer a knock at the motel door it's no surprise a cop's standing in front of me in an official blue uniform chewing on the end of a ballpoint pen. Looks very serious as he tells me, "There's been an accident." Shows me a photo of an ankle tattoo, asks me, "Is this your Gramma, sweetheart?" And, yeah, that's Mary alright. Head spins dizzy. Sit on the edge of the motel bed.

Cop sleuths his way into the bathroom, peeking through drawers and digging his gloved hand across Gramma's piles. I know what's about to happen. He's gonna bend his chin to the radio on his shoulder while keeping his stare locked on me. Call for child services to toss me into another haunted house packed with foster care kids wearing masks that make it look like we're friends, but they're gonna fool me. I'd rather have a shit life and know its shit than a fake one I can't trust. God knows what Gramma's got in those bathroom cabinets. So, I do what I gotta do.