

THE RUNAWAY  
by Brandy Woldstad

Rules and perfection pushed down on me. Anger surged within me. Mom stood in front of me like a sentinel daring me to pass. Words burst from my mouth. “I can’t stand it here! Everything I do is wrong.”

Mom folded her arms across her chest. Her eyes narrow. “You think it’s better out there? Fine, Valerie... leave. You won’t last long.”

Without another word, I grabbed my backpack, yanked the front door open, and marched out. The sound of family photos smashing to the floor as the door slammed gave me satisfaction.

I’d show her. “Away” was my destination as I stomped down Pearl Street without a backward glance.

I lasted long. Long enough to hitchhike to another state. Long enough to change my name, cut and dye my hair, and apply makeup so I looked older than 15. I landed a job, moved off the streets, and sublet an apartment. I lasted long enough to live undetected because good kids blended in.

“Hey, Josie, that girl looks like you.” My roommate pointed to the TV.

My mouth went dry. A news anchor gave my haggard mom a sympathetic look. A photo of my beaming 15-year-old face remained in the upper right corner of the screen. “I don’t think so.” I bit my lip hoping my roommate wouldn’t hear my lie.

The story of my disappearance continued. “It has been three years since Mary Wilson’s daughter disappeared,” the news anchor said.

The camera zoomed in on my mom’s face. “She’s all I have left. Valerie, if you’re watching this...” She sniffled. “PLEASE come home.”

Mom’s pleading eyes connected with mine. I swear she saw me.

My roommate studied me. I squirmed. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Your eyes are similar though.” She shook her head. “That girl could be your twin.”

For the next six months, my mom’s sad face stuck in my mind. Her rules no longer felt like a good reason to stay away. Homesickness ate at me.

I retraced my steps along Pearl Street. Joyful tears, a tight embrace, and apologies propelled me home.

Long grass and dead flower gardens dampened my homecoming. The mailbox overflowed with mail. The front door absorbed my knocks. No answer. I unearthed the spare key and let myself in.

My cough shattered the dusty silence.

“Hello?” My voice sounded small.

I searched the house for mom. Cobwebs stretch like streamers along the ceiling, piles of papers stacked on tables, beds unmade in the bedrooms, dead bugs on the unvacuumed carpet, projects left on tables: all violations of mom’s rules. She was nowhere to be found. I checked the garage. Her car waited. Where was she? Was she okay?

I plopped down at the kitchen table with the phone. My fingers dialed every hospital and every contact in her address book. No one knew where she was. Evening came and went. I waited.

A cobweb clung to the salt and pepper shakers. It reminded me of my life before I ran away. Structured. Fragile. With a swipe of my finger, the cobweb crumpled. With one swipe my life changed.

The next day, my hand trembled as I picked up the phone.

“Hi, this is Valerie Wilson. I’d like to file a missing person report for Mary Wilson... No. This isn’t a joke...”