

Growing Up is For Losers

New England 1985

Wanda Barton lifted one slim leather-clad leg in the air and unzipped her boot. Next time, Doc Martens. Her fishnets had runs. They always did after a long night on the job. She massaged her toes, then made little circles with her ankle before peeling off the other stiletto-heeled boot and flinging it into the corner of the room with its mate.

No matter how many scented candles she lit, Wanda's room smelled of Lysol and old mop. She'd draped a peach-colored scarf over the cheap table lamp to soften the harsh glare, but it hadn't softened the atmosphere, or helped her forget she was camped out in a fleabag motel. And it wasn't the first time.

She made her way to the wall sink and two by three rectangle of tile which passed for a bathroom, took a long look in the mirror, and scraped off what was left of her eye makeup. When she finished, she took the room's one scratched glass out of its white paper bag and poured herself three fingers of Jack from a silver flask - a gift from an admirer in Burlington.

Wanda never drank on the job. Too many things could happen. She only let herself drink when the night was over and she was safely in her room alone with the chain lock on the door. At 26, she was already too old for this line of work.

She was wriggling out of a fake leather miniskirt when an earsplitting scream ripped through the silence. She tiptoed to the window and was about to peek through the grimy blinds when someone pounded on her door.

It was Katie, one of the other girls. Wanda left the chain lock on, and opened the door just a crack.

"Wanda, you gotta come. Now. It's Nina. Something's wrong with her. She fell."

When did I get appointed den mother, Wanda thought. True, she was the oldest, but this wasn't *Little Women* and she wasn't the motherly type. These kids came and went. A few cheap thrills, and they're back to Oshkosh or wherever they came from. Still, she grabbed her silk kimono from the back of the door, tied it tightly around her waist, and unlocked the door.

"Hurry," Katie said, pulling on Wanda's arm.

That was one good thing about being senior girl, getting her own room. At least Wanda could bolt the door and lock out the noise, the booze, the gropers, and be blissfully alone. She padded behind Katie barefoot, getting god-knows-what sticky stuff on the soles of her feet, and sidestepping beer cans, cigarette butts, and what looked like week-old pizza in the hallway.

Outside Katie's room stood two other young girls in various states of undress, hanging in the doorway, too afraid to go in.

They parted for Wanda. Inside, clad only in her panties, and sprawled face-down on the cold bathroom tile was Nina McFarland.

"Jeez. Did anyone call 911?" Wanda asked, running over to the girl. "Call 911. Now!"

Only Katie spoke up. "We didn't want to get her in trouble. We thought you could help."

"Me? Who do I look like, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*? Get on the phone," Wanda said, disgusted. "She's already in trouble."

As Katie dialed, Wanda placed her fingers on Nina's neck to see if she was breathing. She was, but just barely.

"What did she take?" Wanda asked. The girls looked at each other but said nothing.

"Listen, with any luck, an ambulance - if they have one in this hick town - is going to be here soon, and they have a better chance of saving her if you tell them what she took."

"Nina doesn't take drugs," one of them answered. "Ever. We even kidded her about it. She's a vegetarian."

Oh, brother. As if Wanda hadn't seen vegetarians who smoked, and drank, and OD'ed. Fine, if they didn't care, why should she. But she did.

"Let's get her on her feet." Katie and Wanda had no trouble lifting the girl who must have weighed all of ninety lbs. Apart from the faint imprint of the bathroom tile on the side of her face, Nina looked like a sleeping angel, sylph-like, cornsilk

hair, her nearly naked body heartbreakingly vulnerable and exposed. With one hand, Wanda untied her own kimono, shook it off, and wrapped it around the narrow shoulders of the girl who'd be dead if EMS didn't get there fast. They dragged her back and forth in the tiny room, about-facing after half a dozen steps but Wanda knew it was pointless. In some ways she was showing them what to do for the next time.

She sat on the edge of the bed, absent-mindedly fingering the cheap bedspread; the other girls remained huddled in the doorway. The ambulance's swirling red lights reflected in the room's mirror and threw garish, funhouse shadows on all of their faces. She hadn't been able to watch while EMS tried resuscitating the girl, but the sound of a bag being zipped shut told her they'd failed.

If the others had called 911 first, if she'd sprinted down the hall instead of stepping gingerly over the crud, if Nina MacFarland had stayed in Mystic... who knew? She might be dead anyway.

An EMS technician put his hand on her shoulder. "Sorry, miss. No one seems to know much about her except her name."

"She said she was from Mystic, that's all I know. We just worked together.." She heard the other technician snort. In her black lace bra, half-zipped miniskirt and torn fishnets, Wanda

knew what the creep thought. She gave him a look that froze blood in lesser men. "We're backup singers, asshole. The Jimmy Collins Band?" Then she uttered the magic words, "We're with the band."

It was a dream gig for lots of young girls - starry-eyed, Lady Gaga wannabees. You got to travel around the country, sometimes even Europe. And in every town, guys fell in love with you, and girls wanted to be you. All you really had to do was smile and shake. Your hips, your hair, your hands. Sometimes Wanda got to sing. Jimmy liked her and let her take the mic when the band needed a break. But it was a guy band, their fans didn't want to hear some skinny chick whining about lost love. Three years ago, she'd cut a demo that went nowhere, and now Wanda was back in the line, showing a steady stream of new girls the hand motions that went with Jimmy's one big hit, Growing Up is for Losers.

But past the age of 25, the long nights, crap food, and secondhand smoke took their toll. To say nothing of the drugs. It took all of her resolve to say no. Her mother had already lost one kid to drugs. Wanda couldn't do that to her again.

But, with every tour it got harder and harder to resist the bright eyes and instant energy a little white powder seemed to promise. Apparently, Nina hadn't resisted.

Squeaky Jackson, the band's manager, finally showed up. Wanda had never seen him in anything other than jeans and a tour t-shirt and he stank of alcohol, even early in the morning. Maybe it was his cologne. He stood in the doorway, his arms around the other girls, and gave Wanda a useless look that said, whaddya gonna do?

Two EMS technicians strapped the body to a gurney. The one who'd thought they were hookers scooped up a handful of orange pill containers scattered on top of the dresser, singeing his hand on the girls' hotplate. He swore and glared at Katie as if it were her fault, then dumped the pills into Nina's suede shoulderbag. Katie started to protest, but, thought better of it.

One of the nicer ones asked if anyone wanted to come in the ambulance. When no one answered, Wanda just stared at them in disbelief - the sleazy manager who'd hired (and probably slept with) the girl, the roommate who'd bunked with her for 3 months.

"You guys are really something," she said, standing up. "I'll come. Let me get my shoes. And a top." She brushed past them, giving Squeaky a shove, then jogged down the hall to her room.

She quickly pulled on a t-shirt and stepped into her Doc Martens, but by the time she got outside, the ambulance was gone.

"Sonofabitch. I can't believe they left without me."

Squeaky and the girls were gone, too, and Wanda was left alone in the yellowish light of the motel's Exit sign.

At the top of the outside stairs she saw a shadow wave just behind the railing. "Show's over, perv. Just go back to your room." The person stepped into the light.

"It's me, Pete. I heard what happened. You, OK?"

Pete Chinnery was not a perv. And not your average roadie. For one thing, he wore a cross. And not as a fashion statement. For another, he wasn't always screwing the backup singers and groupies. Maybe he was gay. Or maybe he was just a decent guy who loved rock and roll.

He took the stairs slowly, "I can take you to the hospital."

"Yeah, that'd be great."

Wanda ran inside to get a jacket while Pete brought his Harley around.

"You know where you're going?" she asked, straddling the bike and leaning back on the sissy bar. He nodded. They took the back roads and the combination of the bike's rhythm and the wind on her face almost blew away the memory of the ugly scene Wanda had just witnessed. Almost, but not quite.

At the hospital they'd tried to reach a next of kin but, no luck.

"Is there any chance her i.d. is fake?" a doctor said.

"Beats me," Wanda said. The doctor handed her the black plastic garbage bag which held Nina's personal effects and her own kimono.

"In a case like this, we're required to hold onto the body; there's a mandatory autopsy in the state of Connecticut for any death that appears to be drug-related."

"Her roommate says she didn't do drugs." Even as the words came out, Wanda knew they sounded lame, but, the hospital staff was too polite to show they didn't believe her. She scribbled the motel's number on a scrap of paper and handed it to the doctor, and he agreed to call if the autopsy results came back in the next 2 days.

In the parking lot, Pete suggested they go for coffee.

"Good idea." She squashed down the plastic bag that contained most of Nina's worldly possessions, wedged it between Pete and herself, and climbed back on the bike.

Pete Chinnery had been with the band almost as long as Wanda, and this was the first time they'd been alone for more than a few minutes. She was conscious of how tightly her arms were wrapped around him, but couldn't seem to relax her grip. It was almost 3 am when they pulled into a rundown joint with the unlikely name of Paradise.

"That's wishful thinking," Wanda said, swinging her left leg over the padded seat and hopping off.

There were a couple of jocks in the last booth and a few drunken commuters at the counter trying to sober up before they went home and lied to their wives about where they'd been. Wanda tossed the plastic bag into a booth before sliding in and ordering coffee and donuts. Suddenly ravenous, she wolfed down two stale donuts and Pete signaled for more.

"I don't get it with these kids," Wanda said, warming her hands on the cup. "Don't they see the burnouts and wasted groupies at every show?"

"They don't," he said. "They only see the fun, the glamour, the rush of being "with the band."

They talked for hours. Pete, about his ex-wife, and the guy she left him for. And Wanda, about her little sister, who'd fallen in with a rough crowd and died of an overdose while Wanda was shaking a tambourine somewhere in Michigan. By the time the sun came up, they knew everything they needed to know about each other, and when they got back to the motel, for the first time in ages, Wanda was happy to share her room.

Next afternoon, Jimmy Collins and Squeaky called a band meeting. Only half the crew made it, and most of them were nodding as Jimmy spoke.

"Anyone wanna say anything?" A few embarrassed faces, then a deadly silence which Jimmy broke.

"Hey man, I know this is some heavy shit, but we've got a show tonight. Two more before we blow this 'burg, then New Haven, then Boston, then, for some of us, merry old Ireland. So try to chill. Get some extra rest today. Katie, you take over Nina's spot with the tambourine." She beamed, apparently forgetting the reason for her promotion was her dead roommate. "OK, people, set-up at 6:30. Sharp."

From the other end of the room, Pete caught Wanda's eye, and knew what she was thinking. That was it? The girl's life and death had been reduced to "some heavy shit?"

That night the show went off without a hitch. If anyone missed Nina you wouldn't know it. To the crowd they were the singer, the brunette, the redhead, the black one, and the one with the boobs. There'd be a new blonde on the next tour.

After the encores, Wanda was in no mood to hang out with the gang, so she went straight back to the motel. A note had been shoved under her door. Autopsy results inconclusive. No signs of any known drug in Nina MacFarland's body. Official cause of death is cardiac arrest. Have you had any luck finding a relative?

She shuffled through the junk on the dresser for her contact sheet, and dialed a number.

"Squeaky, you busy?"

"Not yet. What is it, Wanda? You gonna make me a happy man after all these years?" She could almost hear him scratching himself over the phone.

"Dream on. I want to talk about Nina. Do you think that could have been a fake i.d. she gave you?"

"It's been known to happen." She heard him fumble around, then strike a match and suck in air. "Look," he said, breathing out hard, "are you really you? I'd be pretty paranoid if I started thinking people weren't who they said they were." She hated to admit it, but he had a point.

"She ever say anything to you about her family?"

"C'mon, Wanda. Do you and I sit around and chat about your family tree? She was over eighteen. We had the standard interview, and then nothing, zip. Not even a return match. I give her a shot at fame and glory and that's the thanks I get. Now, I gotta get pretty and see if I can't get lucky tonight. Unless you wanna come down and save me the cost of a few beers.." Wanda hung up.

Despite the hour, she couldn't sleep. Somewhere Nina's parents would be waiting for her to come home, or to call. Maybe not tonight, but maybe at Christmas, or her birthday, or whenever she got over whatever rift with them sent her out of Mystic with her thumb out and just the clothes on her back.

Mystic. A small CT town just like her own. When Wanda left, she snuck out her bedroom window in the dead of night, her clothes in a pillow case, trailing after a drummer. His band had done five nights in town and after the fourth he'd asked her to leave with them. One semester at UConn hadn't made her any smarter, so she went. She called home once, then not for another three months. By that time her baby sister was dead, buried for two months before she even knew. What had Wanda taken with her? A few pictures, a phone book? Not much.

She opened the black plastic bag they'd given her at the hospital, took out Nina's shoulderbag, and spilled the contents on her bed. The prescriptions were Katie's, - probably why they gave them back. A pack of American Spirit cigarettes, a Bic lighter, and some chewing gum. The bonded leather wallet held a few dollars, her birth certificate and two pictures, one of the band at a party best forgotten, and the other, a snapshot of Nina and another girl flanking a litter of border collies in front of a Christmas tree. Not much else, a tin of Tiger balm, some cheap bracelets, and a rabbit's foot, that clearly didn't work.

Just then there was a knock at her door, more gentle than the previous night's, but startling just the same. This time she guessed who it was. She unfolded her legs and walked to the door, with a quick look in the mirror.

Pete Chinnery stood in the doorway with a Dunkin Donuts bag in one hand and a cardboard tray of coffee in the other.

"I couldn't sleep," he said.

"Me neither, come on in."

The two of them sat on Wanda's bed and sifted through Nina's possessions.

"Not much to go on," Pete said. "We leave for New Haven tomorrow. Mystic's not far from there, but, if we're gonna go, and get back in time for the show, we're gonna need some zzz's." They shoveled everything back into Nina's bag, and put aside the coffee and donuts for breakfast.

The next night, on the tour bus, Wanda pestered everyone who wasn't sleeping about Nina, until Jimmy begged her to stop.

"You're screwing up our karma. You gotta let it go. Life is impermanence, man. Nina, would have been the first to tell you that."

"Why? Was she a Buddhist?"

"She had some crazy notions. Remember that guy in Providence, the Brown Guru?" The Guru was a Brown dropout with no spiritual training as far as Wanda could tell but, he had a good line and a few of the younger girls fell for him.

"Ask Katie. She and Nina bought a lot of his crap. Literally and figuratively."

She climbed back over the outstretched legs of sleeping band members and into her double seat. Katie slept two rows behind her.

"Are you really sleeping?" she whispered, kneeling over the back of the seat. Two people on the bus grumbled yes but there was no answer from Katie. Wanda sank into her seat, and looked out the window for Pete, who was following the bus on his Sportster. Sometimes they towed it, but tonight he felt like a ride. It was just as well. They'd been moving pretty fast and she needed time to think. For the rest of the drive, she flipped through the Keith Richards bio but kept stopping to ask herself how she might find Nina's family.

They pulled into the Best Western at 4:30 am. Squeaky checked them in, handed out keys, and watched them stumble off to their rooms like extras from *Night of the Living Dead*.

Less than three hours later, Wanda was in the lobby drinking watered down coffee from a cup so small it could have been used for a urine sample. Pete flopped down next to her on the flowered sofa.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"You know why."

"Look," he said. "Get some rest. No one but farmers are up at this hour. Meet me back here at 10am. I'll get directions to Mystic." She kissed him on the cheek and dragged her butt back

to her room. By the time she woke up it was after eleven. She ran her fingers through her hair, grabbed her bag, and Nina's, and sprinted down the hall to the lobby. Pete smiled as if she weren't ninety minutes late.

"While you were catching up on your beauty sleep," he said, "I did some research. Mystic doesn't have its own phone book; the county book lists four MacFarlands but none within 100 miles. Sorry, Babe." He held it uselessly on his lap.

She couldn't believe they'd reached a dead end so soon. Once again she rooted around in Nina's bag for some clue. She opened the wallet and stared at the picture of Nina, her old friend, and the group of dogs.

"Who has *five* border collies?" Even before she finished the sentence, she reached for the phone book and flipped to the business pages. "Howling Moon Border Collies," she said. "And guess where they're located." She tossed the book on the sofa, grabbed Pete, and they sprinted to his bike. This time she slung Nina's bag over her shoulder and wrapped herself around Pete like a coat.

When they got to Mystic, they stopped at Helen's Burger Barn to refuel and pick some local brains.

"Sure I know Howling Moon. It's right across the road from Merritt High," the waitress said, topping off their coffees. Wanda took a chance and showed her the picture of Nina and the

collies. She shrugged. "Lots of girls around here look like that - scrawny, dishwater blondes with long hair. When you're my age everyone under twenty looks the same."

"What about the name Nina MacFarland?" Wanda pressed. "That sound familiar?" Another head shake. "Bobby, you know anyone around here named MacFarland?" the waitress yelled.

A kitchen helper came out from behind the swinging chrome doors wiping his hands on his grease-splattered apron. Wanda was glad they hadn't ordered food.

"Who wants to know?" he asked.

Wanda and Pete told him as much as they could without revealing that Nina was dead.

"I went to school with a girl named MacFarland. Don't know where she is, though."

Wanda showed him the picture.

"Yeah, that's her. She used to work at the dog breeder's. What'd she do? Rob a bank?" He had a laugh like a donkey, and something in the way he asked made Wanda want to hit him with a nearby ketchup bottle, but good sense prevailed.

"I owe her money. Just trying to pay her back," Wanda said, getting up to leave before he asked any more questions. Pete peeled off a few bucks and left a good tip for the waitress.

On their way out they heard Bobby yelling, "Hell, you can always leave the money with me. I'll get it to her." Another donkey laugh.

"Nice town," Wanda muttered.

"He's just one guy. Who knows, maybe she wouldn't go to the multiplex with him." His words stopped her in her tracks. With one sentence he'd calmed her down, and made an obnoxious fry-cook, sympathetic.

"How did you get to be so nice?"

"I'm in love," he said. "Makes everything better."

"Save the sweet talk for later. We're going dog shopping, and we've got to do it and get back to New Haven before the curtain goes up." She checked her watch. Two hours until showtime.

Only one small barracks-like building was opposite Merritt High School. There was no sign outside the building, but as Pete's bike sputtered into the driveway, it caused a riot of barking and they knew they were in the right place. A young, very pregnant girl came out, holding her lower back with one hand and a black and white puppy with the other.

"How you gonna take her on a bike?" she asked. "Oh, you're not the Frasers." She put the puppy down, and heaved herself onto a dirty white plastic chair. They told her why they'd come.

"I haven't been here long. Lots of us from Merritt work here part-time." As if on cue, a lanky boy crossed the road towards them, still carrying his schoolbag.

"These folks were asking about a girl who used to work here," she told him. "What was her name?"

"Nina MacFarland." Wanda showed him the picture.

"I remember that litter," he said, smiling, and tapping the photo, "I love the red ones. Yeah, that's Nina. She and her family moved to Storrs so she could go to school without living in a dorm." He looked up from the picture. "I don't think her parents trusted her."

"Maybe you're mistaken. The girl we're talking about has been traveling with a band for the last year."

He was emphatic. "My cousin went out with her. That's her, I'm sure. Crazy redhead."

An hour later, in Storrs, a redhaired, Nina MacFarland stared at them through a screen door. "Can I help you?"

"We thought we were looking for Nina MacFarland's family. Seems we found the genuine article. Can you tell us who the blonde girl in this picture is?"

"Why?"

"Because she's dead, and we thought she was Nina MacFarland," Wanda snapped, losing patience.

"What happened?" the girl asked, hanging on to the door, to steady herself.

"We're not sure," Pete said, gently. "Can we come in?"

Nina let them in and motioned for Pete and Wanda to sit down in the parlor.

"I can't believe she kept that picture."

She was Caroline Geraci.

"Any idea why Caroline would tell people she was you?"

Nina said no, but she was a lousy liar.

"She's past protecting now," Pete said. "And the authorities in another part of Connecticut think you're dead. If you ever want to vote or get a new driver's license you're gonna have to tell someone. Why not start with us?"

"Caroline borrowed my birth certificate once. She never returned it. I probably wouldn't even have remembered if I didn't need it when I registered for school."

"Why did she need it?"

"Who remembers? Some party, some club she wanted to get into. She liked to party. She wasn't bad, just a little wild."

"Caroline and I lost touch the summer we moved here. My parents were glad, they thought she was a bad influence."

"Drugs?"

"No way. Caroline was a juice head. But she tried a lot of herbal stuff. My mom's a nurse. She said it wasn't safe. Anyway,

I didn't hear from her for almost a year, then I got a postcard. From Atlanta."

Where she joined the tour, Wanda thought.

"That was the last time. She sounded happy. She asked about the dogs." A tear rolled down the girl's face and Wanda realized it was the first time anyone had cried for the person they knew as Nina MacFarland. She hadn't, none of the band members had - not even Katie, her roommate.

"Any idea where her folks are?"

The real Nina shook her head. "Her mom was divorced. I think she remarried, but we were gone by then, so I don't know what her new name is. Um, I gotta get to class now. I don't know what else I can tell you. Can you just tell them I'm not dead so I don't have to tell my folks about this?"

They'd spent all day tearing around Connecticut and had done nothing but replace one missing family with another.

"We'll do what we can. We should be heading back, anyway," Wanda said, "we have a show tonight."

"Cool. Um, are you gonna keep that picture? I don't have many of me with the litters."

Wanda handed over the photo.

"It's a good one," Nina said. "I bet Katie posed us for 20 minutes."

They raced back to New Haven. By the time they got there, it was close to seven pm and everyone else was at the theatre. Wanda ran to her room, grabbed an outfit, and they took off again. Outside the theatre, on the bus, people were practicing their moves, and psyching themselves up for the performance.

"Jeez, where have you two been?" Squeaky asked, taking a swig and screwing the top back on a bottle of wine. "It's a little late for a nooner. Never mind just get your asses in gear."

"Where's Katie?"

"*Inspiring* our fearless leader."

Inspiration came in many forms and Wanda sensed it was about to come pretty soon. She marched to Jimmy's dressing room, Pete trailing behind.

"I don't think you want to interrupt them," he said. She ignored him and banged on the door.

They heard grunting and heavy breathing inside. She pounded again.

"We still got fifteen minutes man. Get lost."

"It's Wanda and Pete. We want to talk to Katie. About Caroline."

It was a measure of respect for the two of them that Jimmy opened the door at all. In the mirror, Wanda could see Katie buttoning her shirt.

"Wanda, I love you, babe, but unless this Caroline person is here to make it a threesome she's not needed," Jimmy said, running his hands through his hair.

"I think Caroline's already been here. Not tonight, though. Isn't that right Katie?"

"What the hell is she talking about?"

All eyes were on Katie. Hers were fixed on Wanda. She held Wanda's gaze for a few minutes, then dropped her head in her hands. "You couldn't just drop it? In five days we would have been in Ireland. We're gonna be the opening act on a major tour. I could have been out of here."

"Just tell us what happened," Wanda said, not unkindly.

"They followed me everywhere in high school. Every concert, every party, there were Caroline and Nina. At first it was fun, having these kids look up to me. Then it got to be a pain; I caught Caroline coming on to my boyfriend. Two summers ago I hitchhiked cross-country. I sent Nina a few cards because I was lonely, but broke it off after her family moved. That other bitch tracked me down. How psycho is that?"

She looked up at them as if that explained everything.

"Caroline found me in Atlanta. She pleaded with me to talk to Squeaky about hiring her. I wouldn't do it. I didn't want her around, so, I told her she was too young."

"So she went to Squeaky on her own, told him she was eighteen, and proved it by flashing the birth certificate she'd borrowed from Nina, but had never returned," Wanda said. Katie nodded.

"What happened the night she died?"

"I knew Caroline had slept with Squeaky, who hasn't? But, she was working her way through the rest of the band, and it was only a matter of time before she got to Jimmy. I thought if *she* was out of the way, he'd notice *me*." She broke down. "I didn't mean to poison her, I just wanted her out of commission that night. It was going to be so good." Jimmy Collins took a few steps back; he looked like he was in shock.

"What did you give her?" Pete asked.

"Pennyroyal. I got it from The Brown Guru. I mixed some in her tea, but I guess I put in too much." Katie was sobbing now.

Just then someone knocked on Jimmy's door. "I hate to break up this group hug, but you guys have five minutes to get your asses on stage."

Pete Chinnery took charge. "Stall for time. Jimmy, zip up your fly and get out there. Wanda, round up the rest of the girls. I'll stay with Katie until the cops come. The rest of us have a show to do."

The End.

