

## Identity (*Excerpt*)

You didn't know what you were when you were born. Your mother, with her flaming hair and fiery words, said over tea and toast, "Ember, you're the spitfire image of your father." Your father, who had lost all his hair at thirty, and shoveled life behind him as if reality were a blizzard, said, "what you didn't get from me is your mother's fault." It's no wonder you spent your first few years alone.

Your only friend was Agatha, the eighty-year-old woman who lived next door and let you have your fill of powder-coated lemon drops anytime you wanted. You liked her orange-scented couch and her crinkled smiling cheeks. You wished you could spend every day in a pajama dress and bunny slippers like she did.

You went to Doull Elementary. It was far. One hundred miles, you thought. You had to take a bus. And the bus stop was always crowded with kids who didn't like you. Older kids. Fifth-grade pushers and high school smokers. And Zach. Zachary Venn, who ate his boogers and made fun of your real name – December.

Your hairdresser lived nearby, and it was the furthest you were allowed to walk. She said your light brown hair was very thin, but thick because you had so much of it. Your mom brought you for perms. You came for her son, Levi. Levi was in first grade, too, but he didn't like you much.

"I'm not going to like girls until I'm in eighth grade," he always said. You would ask him why, but he would only shrug and say he didn't know. One time, he bought you Strawberry Shortcake earrings and a matching necklace for your birthday. You didn't know his mom made him give it. You thought you loved Levi.

When Levi asked you to walk home with him on the last day of school – you knew he would marry you. Two hours later, the police picked you up at a park in the complete opposite direction of your house. Levi told them you made him do it. *I've divorced you*, you thought.