

her nails and wore pretty headbands and lipstick. Because I was a child.

"Katrina, Theresa was 72 years old. She died of a heart attack," said Old Sister Lily.

"Too much Willie Mae's fried chicken," tasked Sister Hope.

Old Sister Lily ignored her. "She got y'all from here, same place your brothers came from, so your brothers brought y'all back."

I was so shocked I grew an inch. And Old Sister Lily was just getting started. "Y'all might as well know it," she continued, "The Rookery isn't even a licensed orphanage. People bring us babies, we find homes. We're not nuns." She ripped her habit off her head, great waves of silvery hair cascading. It could have been the parting of the Gray Sea. I think I peed my pants. Not nuns!

"It's impossible to keep this up. That's why we stick with babies. We started wearing these god-awful outfits after Camille got robbed at knifepoint on our own street. While carrying a baby! Even crackheads usually don't attack nuns. And yes, Pastor Letur knows we aren't nuns. Everybody in that church knows we aren't nuns!" She stamped her foot like, so there!

"So those aren't your real names?" Ella asked looking at Camille and Hope. Ella's eyes were bigger than her hair.

"Course not. Don't be ridiculous. It's a joke," said Camille. "I'm Diane. Pleased to meet ya'."

"Brenda," said Hope, "and well, Lily really is Lily."

Well, bless my soul.

Five weeks later

Five weeks later, Charlie came home. I knew he was coming; letter said today. I sat out on the front porch swing and waited, nervous as a mayfly. Ella and the Sisters left me to myself. Would I know him? Would he still have the little cross-stitch pattern of pockmarks on his cheek? Would he smell like Afghanistan and dust and guns?

When I saw my brother walking up Franklin Avenue, I ran down that street and clamped on to him like I was an alligator. I pulled him under and ate him in one bite. He was mine.

Charlie stayed at The Rookery for a week. He played with all the babies, one, two, buckle my shoe, and Charlie Horse. He talked to me long and slow, and we talked about Beau and Mama. We polished the stone of what we had, what we lost. On the third day, he told me he was getting married and moving to Arizona. I should come with him, and I could grow cactus that blooms only at Christmas. I could see saguaro. The rain is filled with dust. He told me that Beau left half of his death benefit to him and half to me. I could go to college. I could buy a dress that wasn't second-hand.

But then Ella wouldn't have worn it first.

How could I explain that The Rookery and the Sisters and Ella, the Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, and the merry-go-round of babies had become my home? How could I say that in truth we had to work hard to recognize each other, our travels had taken us so far apart? How could I leave Ella, who cut her feet for me?

I told him I would think about it.

Three years later

Ella and I rent a little two-bedroom bungalow near Tulane. Garden District folk might consider our bedrooms the perfect size for a wine cellar, but a room of my own is orphan-speak for luxurious. Ella is majoring in law with a goal to work for woman's rights and sex trafficking. Her boyfriend brings beignets, and there's always one for me. I'm majoring in creative writing. This is my first assignment.

On Sundays, we go to church on Franklin Avenue and then to The Rookery to do all the cooking and take care of the babies to give the Sisters an afternoon off. In good weather, we eat outside and when the magnolia petals fall, they fall right on us. □



Laura Newman grew up at Lake Tahoe during the 1970s. "The Franklin Avenue Rookery for Wayward Babies" will appear in her forthcoming second book of short stories. One of the stories in the collection was just announced as a Finalist in LitMag's Virginia Woolf Award for Short Fiction. Newman's first book, *Parallel to Paradise*, Le Rue Press, won a Poynter's Global Ebooks gold award. Newman considers her personal best accolade the Catholic League's call for a boycott of the Reno News & Review after the publication of one of her 95-word story entries.



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