

An illustration of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a green sweater and blue jeans, sitting on a red airplane seat. She is looking out a window with her hand on her chin, holding a rolled-up newspaper. The background shows the interior of an airplane with orange and grey panels.

MEMOIRS *of a* BOOKBAT

A graphic element consisting of three horizontal stripes: a yellow stripe on top, a black stripe in the middle, and a yellow stripe on the bottom.

KATHRYN LASKY

MEMOIRS *of a* BOOKBAT

Kathryn Lasky

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For Max,
who reads with passion

PROLOGUE

The funny thing about Gray is his name. He's not gray at all. He is—with his sharp blue eyes, standout freckles, and red hair, Georgia-dirt red hair, that's what I call it—full of color. And besides all that he is one of the most opinionated people I know.

Gray has this craziness about him, and in a sense that's how my troubles began. But really, I think—I know—that trouble had been coming for a long time. Granted, it probably wouldn't have been as interesting without Gray. It still would have been scary, though, and sooner or later I would have wound up where I am right now, on a bus in the middle of nowhere, with this awful knot in my stomach.

Gray Willette is the best friend I have ever had. And I haven't had all that many.

For the last four years, from about fifth grade until now, I had never been in one school long enough to do a whole term project, let alone make a really close friend. A lot of places I never even got a report card because my little sister, Weesie, and I hardly ever spent more than six weeks in one school district. At first I thought the moving was OK, because things got so much better around the time we started traveling.

For one thing, we got a much nicer trailer with a really quiet generator. The generator was important to Mom. She said the old one sounded like a clothes dryer with a load of marbles and tin cans. The noise never bothered me much. It just became what they call white noise. It screened out loud talking and everything else from inside the trailer and all the babies crying and folks yelling outside in the trailer court. It meant I could read in peace.

No doubt about it, reading saved me back then. Friends were hard to make when I knew I'd have to pick up and leave every month or so, but it was sure different with books. In Arkansas

they were doing base ten problems in math in the sixth grade; then when we got to Missouri they were still having kids draw pies with slices to explain fractions. Every new classroom was different, but I could always count on the library to be familiar. The call numbers don't change. 910 is always geography whether I'm in Oklahoma City or Kokomo, Indiana. 398 is folktales, 560 is dinosaurs, and 549 is rocks and minerals. Even the gerbils in the cage by the checkout desk are always the same. Those little rodents get the same eczema in California that they get in Tennessee and Nebraska.

It got even better when I discovered inter-library loan. Any book I wanted could follow me wherever I went. Nothing stumps the public library system. My notion at this point is that librarians should take over the postal system and Social Security. Gray says that's stretching it, but as long as I'm stretching it, he says, why not have them run the Defense Department, too?

I met Gray at the Spoonwood Public Library in California. I had read my way out of the children's room and into the science fiction shelves upstairs. The first time I ever saw him, I was

standing in the section labeled ScF Edd. I was just starting David Eddings' Belgariad series; Book One wasn't in, so I was considering Book Two, *Queen of Sorcery*. Gray was about six feet away at ScF Mac, looking at Delores Macuccho, the foremost master of horror fiction—but we just call her Delores.

It's hard not to think about Gray. He said before he helped me pile on this bus not to worry—he'd see me sometime not too far off. I don't know. When I look out the window of the bus speeding along, I know that with every mile I'm farther away from Gray. And I'm farther away from my parents, from Weesie, and from all the trouble, too.

I *won't* think about it. If I do, I'll either get mad or start feeling sorry for myself. I can see my reflection in the window. My hair is a mess. I can't exactly wash it on a bus. It's gotten all frizzy. Dirty blond frizz—a noncolor, as far as I'm concerned. And my too-small eyes are a wash-out gray-green. My nose is small, too, and so is my mouth. And this wouldn't be a problem except that my face is too big. So all my stupid features don't look delicate and feminine at all. They just look stranded on a desert of pale freckles. Charming!

I press my cheek against the cool glass. I can almost feel the rain streaking down it, the rivulets flattened into thin sheets, blurring the view outside. I like this landscape. Just wheatfields somewhere in Kansas, the wheat still young and thin, no ugly billboards, no mile markers to remind me of fixed points. I'm suspended in this wet, glazed world of wheat and sky, pressed into a moving watercolor. I'm a wet streak on the paper. Shapes shift, colors change. Nothing is dry, nothing is set. It can all wash away in an instant.

It's been clear to me for a long time that my family's moving around—and the reason behind it—pretty much wrecked my life, but Mom always says I should be more grateful. Migrant laborers' kids have it worse than Weesie and I ever did. All those pickers in the Napa and San Joaquin valleys, or out around Castroville, artichoke capital of the world, they're just picking grapes and artichokes and strawberries. My family picks something more, something for the everlasting. Mom says we're not just migrant laborers—we're migrants for God.

AN ENDLESS NIGHT

There was a time, before the trailer, when we lived in a house that stayed in one place. Weesie wasn't born yet. I think we had a little patch of yard, and I know there was a sprinkler because I can remember my dad turning it on for me to play in. One time it squirted him right in the face, so he just decided to let it sprinkle him, clothes and all, and we both stood there and laughed.

Then we moved. I had been all excited because Mom said we were moving into a house on wheels and I thought that was really funny. I don't think it was funny for Mom and Dad. Something had happened with Dad's job, and it was cheaper

to live in the trailer, I guess. But my mom was trying to make the trailer seem like a great adventure. Putting a good face on it, which is OK. Sometimes you have to do that.

“You mean the house is going to roll, Mom?” I asked.

“Yes, darling.”

“You mean everything inside of it rolls with it?”

“Yes, ma’am, everything.”

“You mean the beds go traveling?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And the stove?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And the kitchen table and the refrigerator and the sink and the bathroom?”

“Yes ma’am, yes ma’am, yes ma’am, and yes ma’am.” She laughed and gave me a squeeze. But her laugh was kind of tight and she hugged me a little bit too hard.

I thought the whole notion of a rolling house was wonderful, almost like a magic carpet. I was wrong. The rolling house was a small dark tunnel with one little window on each side, and the bathroom always smelled. For a long time we never rolled anywhere. We were plugged into a trailer

court on the edge of some town, and there was a neon pizza sign across the highway that blinked off and on and filled one window with its red ZZs. I could see that window from my bed, and I used to stare at it at night when I couldn't sleep because of Dad's yelling. And Mom would be whimpering.

They might as well have both been screaming bloody murder because it tears up whoever is listening all the same. But it is not my mom's style to yell. Whenever Dad got upset, Mom would always try to act calm first, and she'd tell him that nothing was as bad as it seemed. Then she would be super sweet. Not that she didn't mean it, but she just laid it on so thick sometimes that it would make Dad get worse. And when he did get madder, then finally, but not often, she might start screaming back.

I don't really remember what my dad's jobs were before he started driving for the bus company. He had been spending a lot of time at home, so I guess he was out of work. Then he got the bus-driving job and things got better for a while—until the accident. I'll never forget that night. I was seven years old.

“It’s going to work out, Hank. They’ve got insurance. You know what Mr. Foster said. It was the old lady’s fault. She just walked right out there against the light.”

“Oh, this is all very easy for you to say, Beth. You don’t know how these people operate.” His voice, a low hiss, scalded the close air of the trailer and cut right through my sleep. I opened one eye. The ZZs were blinking in the window.

“They can’t blame you for something that you didn’t do intentionally.”

This was the way it always started out—Mom trying to be so understanding and Dad so full of anger. Sometimes I thought it would be better if she just started right off yelling.

“Now, now, Hank,” she said softly.

“Don’t do that!” Of course I never said it, and her soothing voice went on. I heard her get up and walk across to him. “Don’t!” I shouted silently. She was going to stroke his hair. I knew it.

Then he mumbled something about going out, and she barked, “No!” From my bed I could see their shadows dancing across the ceiling.

“Get out of the way!” my dad yelled.

The shadows were knotted up around the

doorway and then I heard a yelp. I leaned way out of bed to peek through my doorway to the front of the trailer. Dad was gone, and Mom was just standing there, holding her mouth. I knew in an instant what had happened. As if to confirm it, Mom kicked the half-open door as hard as she could. It slammed shut.

“Damn door,” she muttered. It had swung back and knocked her in the mouth.

She stuffed her face into a dish towel and the generator kicked in right on cue to blanket her whimpers. Full of rattles and sputters, it made a good cover. We could all be separate and private, hiding within its din. But suddenly the noise stopped. I heard my dad come back into the trailer.

“We can’t afford to run this stupid generator. You’re just going to have to be hot.” His voice was hoarse.

Most of the power came from the trailer court, but if we wanted to run air conditioning, we had to do it from our own generator because of something to do with power overloads and brownouts. What I did understand was that it cost us more when we ran the generator, so whenever Dad got mad about money he yanked out

the plug. He'd come back only to shut it off. Then he left again. Mom didn't dare turn it back on.

The night was long and hot and sweaty. I heard my mom whimpering, and I heard my dad come back in later. I knew he'd been drinking. I hoped he'd get so hot he would turn the generator back on, not for the coolness as much as for the noise, but he didn't. He just mumbled through the night. Then I heard him whimpering, and the night seemed never to end, and we were all there in the awful darkness and the thick, quiet heat, exposed and bare with all our sores showing and the two red ZZs blinking dumbly. I wanted suddenly to be a bird, to spiral out into the night and fly high above the ZZs, to fling myself into the wind. In the morning, if morning ever came, I knew I would see a welt across my mom's face and then pretend not to see it. I shut my eyes tight. Inside my eyelids the glaring neon still danced its red-hot jig.

Morning did come, and there was a red dent, the exact shape of the door's edge, from Mom's cheek to her chin. Her swollen lips looked like a mashed-up dark blossom. I didn't notice until later that one of her front teeth was chipped. I

could pretend that I didn't see the dent, and I could have pretended that I didn't see the chip, but before I thought about it I blurted out, "Mom, what happened to your tooth?"

Her hands flew to her mouth. Behind her fingers her face looked like it was collapsing, and I suddenly got really scared. I thought that if she took her hand away there would be a dark emptiness that her face had fallen into. Her eyes were big, as if they were watching something terrible, a private kind of terribleness that I wasn't supposed to see. Then she turned and ran out, slamming the trailer door.

It was the sound I'd heard when she had kicked the door shut that night and cursed it. I suddenly saw the instant after the yelp; I saw the white splinters fly through the hot, dark air. When I had asked her about the tooth it was as if she had been hit again—as if I had hit her. We had all been so careful, me, my dad, and my mom, not to notice the mark the door had left on Mom's face. They thought I had been asleep, or they were at least pretending I was. And I had been pretending. I made my own generator noise inside my head, and so did Mom, whenever Dad pulled the plug. We created the rattles and thunks so we