

« [Alquezar by Kevin King](#)[Time Catcher by Albulena Shabani](#) »**FLASH FICTION****Really by Barbara Fried**

When I was five, I asked my mother where I came from.

I found you in the stars, she said.

No, really, I said.

Really.

That night, I dragged my bed under the window and stared up at the sky, looking for the nearest star. I held my arm up to the window to measure how far it was from there to here, and then imagined my mother flying through space with me in her arms.

When I was eleven, I asked her again.

You were a gift from God, she said.

I told my friend what she said. My friend rolled her eyes. *Parents are always saying things like that. Ask her again. Ask her who your father is.*

You don't have a father, my mother said. You just have me. But I love you enough for two people. More.

My friend said, *I bet your mom got knocked up. She probably got really drunk one night and woke up the next morning in some guy's bed. That shit happens all the time.*

My mother doesn't drink, I said.

Anymore. Seeing your ugly mug for the first time probably sobered her up.

I punched her in the arm, a friendly punch.

Seriously, I said, do you think I could be a foundling?

My friend snorted. *Everyone thinks they're a foundling. I mean, who wouldn't want to be a foundling, once you see who your real parents are?*

I began to dream of being found, under the apple tree in our front yard, in a crevice in the stonewall across the road.

When I was thirteen, a boy named Eric invited me to a dance. I didn't want to go, but when I told my mother about it, she said, *Go. If you don't, you'll never know whether you like it.*

My mother made me a dress and decorated it with little ribbons, each sewn on by hand. The afternoon of the dance, she washed my hair and sat me down in front of her bedroom mirror to do it up.

Don't make it fancy, I said.

Don't you want to be pretty?

I'm not pretty.

Don't say that. You're beautiful.

I stared at myself in the mirror while my mother combed my hair out. I was a scrawny thing, tall for my age, stringy fire-red hair hanging down around my face, blue eyes, freckles everywhere. Then I stared at my mother in the mirror. She was short and chubby, dark, with brown eyes and curly brown hair. She looked like Orphan Annie, forty years later.

Whatcha looking at?

Nothing, I said. Just thinking.

What about?

Who my father is.

Her hand shook so hard that the comb knocked against my skull.

I don't know.

You don't know?

I found you.

Where?

In Target, she said. In the women's bathroom.

This time I didn't ask if it was really true.

Who left me there? I said.

I don't know.

Didn't you ask?

There was no one around to ask.

There must have been people all over the store you could have asked.

She put down the comb and buried her face in her hands.

I knew if I asked, they would take you away from me. Once I found you, I couldn't let you go. I knew I was meant to find you.

When I used to dream about being found, it was always a young woman who left me. She had red hair and sad blue eyes. She was very poor, sometimes she was dying. For days, she hid behind the big oak tree across the road from our house, a basket on the ground beside her, watching my mother come and go, letting the dog out for a run, weeding the small vegetable garden in our front yard. Then one morning when my mother wasn't in

sight, she set the basket in our front yard, put on my bonnet to shield me from the sun, and kissed me goodbye.

About the author:

Barbara Fried's fiction has appeared in *Guernica*, *Subtropics*, and *Bellevue Literary Review* (where it was a finalist in the 2013 Fiction Contest). In her other life, she is a law professor at Stanford University, and has published widely in political, moral and legal theory.



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