

# SMALL TOWN SECRETS

Emma Spinks

First Place—Short Story Competition  
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

Stuffy air choked me as I entered the small, dimly lit shop. Weak rays of sunlight leaked through the window, lighting the dust drifting through the air. My fingers brushed the same books that had resided there for at least a decade. I slowly looked down before jumping at the sight of an unfamiliar gray shape.

“Christ!” I shouted.

I grabbed my chest, catching my breath before glancing down at the small cat beside me. She wove through my legs, purring deeply. Bending down, I scooped her up and carried her to the cat bed lying on the checkout counter.

“It’s rude to scare people,” I mumbled, rubbing her head softly. “Where is that Southern hospitality?”

“Jo, dear, try not to take the Lord’s name in vain in my shop.” Ms. Regina moved from behind the shelves. “Certain patrons could take offense.”

“My bad,” I said before I hugged my elderly friend.

Since we moved here when I was a little girl, my dad had taken me to Ms. Regina’s small bookstore. My dad always said we needed to support local shops over chains to keep our small economy alive. I remembered sitting in the middle of the tiny children’s section as I pored over the selection. My father and I didn’t get along as well as we used to, and this place painfully reminded me of cheery days of the past.

It didn’t keep me from coming back, though. Ms. Regina still welcomed me with open arms. Her New Jersey accent refused to mold into the thick Southern drawl typical to this area, and I appreciated the reprieve from the same thick molasses voices. Her bony arms wrapped around me, gnarled hands gripping my back. Her powdery floral scent hit my nose, and I fought off a coughing fit.

She moved behind the counter before sitting on her lime green stool. Her drooping eyes glanced at me as she asked, “Did you hear about the teacher at the local high school?”

I sucked in a breath, “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

One of my old friends called me last night to inform me that Mr. Letcherson, my old U.S. History

teacher, was found dead in a burned soybean field. No tears fell from my eyes as she told me how he overdosed. I only felt shock.

I could only think about his beloved German Shepard, General. Mr. Letcherson loved his dog, and I wondered how he could leave General behind.

“Such a shame,” she said. “How could they let him fall into such a state?”

I looked at my feet. “He had a pretty horrible year. His life pretty much fell apart.”

“I heard his wife kicked him out of the house after he was fired for being drunk on the job.”

“She did.”

“She divorced him, too, didn’t she?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ms. Regina shook her head, “Poor man.”

I nodded before petting the small, gray cat again.

*Why did nobody help him?*

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The drive home was nothing out of the usual for me. My windows rolled down as Chris Motionless shouted through my speakers, and I screamed with him. I quickly turned down the music before pulling into the driveway.

The house felt quiet when I entered. I expected to trip over pairs of muddy boots in the doorway, but I was surprised to find nothing there. My dad must still be at work.

It seemed my dad was never home anymore. He was a farmer and worked from sunup to sundown in scalding hot fields. I felt conflicted about his absence. When he was here, we argued constantly. The house ended up in a chaotic mess no matter how hard my mom and I cleaned. Whenever he was gone, it was quiet and peaceful around the house, yet I missed him.

Stepping into the kitchen, I was immediately assaulted by my mother.

“Why did you take so long?” she demanded, eyes narrowed.

I set my keys in the dish. “Ran into Ms. Regina.” She nodded. “What did y’all talk about?”

*“How could you be selfish when you’re suffering?”*

“Mr. Letcherson’s death.”

She fell silent as she continued to flip through her planner, contemplating what to say. I watched her, waiting.

“Did you behave yourself?”

I glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “Did you behave yourself around town? Did you actually behave like a lady this time?”

I rolled my eyes. Why should anyone care how I behave? Why should it matter what people think? “I did,” I said.

“I better not get a message from anyone saying you were acting like a fool,” she warned.

That’s right. She has eyes everywhere in this town.

The room fell quiet as I stocked the fridge with Ozarka water bottles. I thought the conversation was over, but she spoke again.

“People who commit suicide are selfish.”

“What?”

“They’re selfish,” she said. “They don’t think about how much they hurt the people who love them.”

I bit my lip, letting her talk as I tuned out her ramblings. How could you be selfish when you’re suffering? That’s like saying a man is selfish as he lies on the ground bleeding from a gunshot wound to the chest.

“Jo, are you listening to me?”

I snapped out of my trance before nodding hurriedly. “I’m gonna go on a bike ride.”

She didn’t even look up. “Be home before dark.”

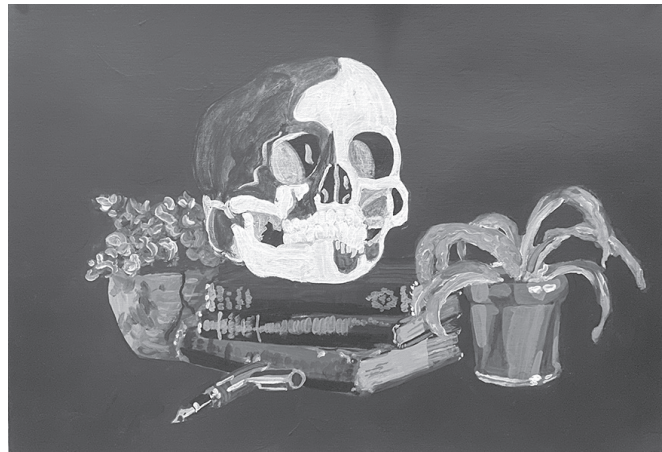
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“I’m outside your house, punk. Hurry up.”

Finley’s agitated voice cut through my speakers sharply. “It’s not my fault you didn’t give me a heads up, butthead. I’ll be out in a second.”

My phone beeped as he ended the call. I sat in the narrow driveway, my bike leaning against the wall of his garage. Finley was possibly one of my best friends, but I would never admit that to him. He would tease me endlessly; I’d never live it down.

Finley and I met in ninth grade in gym class after he asked me if he was in the right place for gym. To say our friendship was rocky would be an understatement. Finley used to be hateful and pessimistic, and our friendship hit a snag in the middle of ninth grade after an explosive argument. Then at the beginning of tenth



## *Bob, a Still Life*

Sophia Toner

Third Place—Painting  
Acrylic

grade, he approached me and said he was working on himself. He asked if we could be friends again.

We’ve been inseparable ever since.

The screen door banged shut, and I quickly looked up. Finley pulled his hair into a messy bun and grabbed his bike. We kicked off, pedaling into the cool autumn afternoon.

“Where are we going?” he shouted.

“Just follow me.”

“Following you would lead me into a car.”

I flipped him off over my shoulder, and I heard him laugh behind me.

The winds fought against us, but I wasn’t in the mood to give in. Reckless drivers raced past us as we flew down pothole covered roads. Usually, Finley and I would be chattering away, but something was wrong with me today.

I couldn’t smile.

Finley asked me every now and then where we were going, but I didn’t respond to him. I turned left and led us down a dirt road. My thighs burned as I struggled through the shifting path. The smoky stench of burned crops caused my lungs to weaken. I didn’t care. Let my asthma act up.

I turned off into a field before abandoning my bike. I walked to a nice patch of ground before lying down and staring at the fluffy clouds. I heard Finley’s shoes crunch the plant corpses as he walked toward. He squatted down, tapping my head.

“What are you doing now, idiot?”

“I want to know what he saw before he died.”

He grunted before lying down beside me.

The birds chirped softly, and the wind gusted overhead. The dirt cooled my sweating body as the weak autumn sun gently warmed me. Small bugs crawled over small mounds of mud, and I prayed they wouldn't touch me.

"Do you think he was scared?" I whispered.

Finley shrugged, "Maybe. Maybe not."

"I guess it depends on if he was ready or not."

"Probably."

"Finley, let's get out of this town."

He laughed, "Alright, what'll we do?"

I paused before presenting him with my idea.

"We'll make a movie, right? It's about these hot teens on bikes who live in this small town."

"Sounds familiar."

"Shut up and let me finish. Anyway, one of them decides they can't take small town life anymore, and they decide to leave with only their bike and a backpack. So then the other teen goes on this huge journey to find their missing friend."

"I think it would sell," he said.

I rolled over and looked at him. "Are you ready?"

His hazel eyes shot to me, questioning me with their intense gaze. "Ready for what? To leave and make the movie?"

"No, death."

"No," his deep voice startled me with its seriousness. "I don't want to die yet."

"I don't mean do you want to die right now," I said. "Are you at peace with the concept of death?"

"The answer is still no."

I nodded before lying on my back again. My eyes began to close, and I began to drift into a dreamless sleep when Finley interjected.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

He sat up, frowning as usual. His bun fell apart and allowed his hair to cascade down to his shoulders.

"Are you at peace with death?"

I laughed as I always did whenever death was brought up.

"I'm serious, Jo. Are you?"

I looked at him, scared to see the concern in his eyes.

I chuckled softly, "Don't be ridiculous, Finley. Come on, let's go somewhere else."

"Jo, just answer-"

I grabbed my bike and started running down the dirt road. "Come on, dummy!"

Finley sighed but pedaled after me anyway. I'm glad he realized that I wasn't going to answer his question.

Some things are better left unsaid. △

## ***THE CHRIS READ AWARD FOR FICTION***

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science's Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris's first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris's face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always "wake me" and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris's work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans  
Class of 1991