

# The Origin of Esmeralda

Kieran Sullivan

## July 4th, 2014: Kieran

There were four bunk beds, with log posts and blankets draped over the support beams. Each blanket was a makeshift curtain, creating eight miniature “rooms” in each bed. Kieran was huddled in her top bunk, on the close left side of the rectangular basement room, staring at the little door of the electrical box on the wall next to her bed. It hummed and throbbed, its vibrations the only thing she could hear or feel in the vast darkness. She peered through the blanket curtains, nervous to peek out. Esmeralda had been so close, her cousins told her. She nearly got her dad, they said.

“She’s here Kier!” Jack shouted from within the dark room. It was bedtime, but Kieran could never sleep now.

“Better watch out,” Phoebe giggled.

Kieran shut her eyes and her nose wrinkled. She took a deep breath but couldn’t calm down. That house was so close. Just down the street, her sister and cousins had gone with Dad and Uncle Sean to explore the haunted house of Esmeralda.

Kieran couldn’t be alone in her bunk bed any longer. Trembling, she slipped out from under the covers. In the vacant darkness that had always scared her, her pupils widened and strained for any sliver of light in the basement room. It felt like the darkness was drying out her eyes, and no matter how wide she opened them, she couldn’t see anything except horrifying imaginary faces jumping out at her.

Sliding off the bed, her bare toes reached down and found the sturdy wooden steps that led up to her bunk. She stepped carefully down each one, while her arms stretched out to hold onto the bed posts on either side of her. There was a bunk right across from hers, the long ends of each bed staring face to face. Wooden posts bordered both mattresses, and her hands glided over the dark, glossy wood, but she was nervous she would get a splinter. Every once in a while, the glue that held the wooden fibers in place gave way, and little pieces of crunchy, glued wood would stick out, catching on clothes or scratching little legs.

Her feet found the rust-orange, concrete floor. The cold surface sent chills up her legs and through her entire body. She took a breath and ran. Down the aisle of the bunkroom, into the basement living room, past the bar with license plates adorning the walls, and up the staircase to the main floor.

No lights were on, but through all of the old windows, lined with the plaid curtains grandma had made, she could make out the shapes of the cabin room she knew so well. Kieran carefully avoided the dinner table and sprinted to Mom’s room.

“Kier?”

She turned around, frightened.

“Grandma?” She asked.

“What’s wrong, honey? Can’t sleep?” Grandma came closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, patting her head.

"It's Esmeralda," Kieran said, "Jack says she's here, that she's coming for me, and that he— he and Phoebe, Mia, Zach and Sam saw her. That she nearly got Dad and he had to fight her off."

"Oh, Kier!" Grandma hooted a quiet laugh. "Don't you worry about that. It's all fun and make-believe. Go on back to sleep, alright?"

## **July 7th, 1962: Audrey**

Audrey ran until her feet bled and blisters swelled. She ran until the soggy soles of her worn shoes were torn to nothing and she could feel the wet, cold road underneath her calloused skin. The evergreens and oak trees around her stood like guardians: menacing, powerful, but nurturing. More of a parental figure to her than her father and mother ever were.

She couldn't stay in that wretched place for another second. She couldn't – just couldn't bear to even breathe the suffocating air inside that house.

Audrey's mind became lost in the horrors of her childhood. Her memories whirled and whizzed around in her head like bullets, and the pain she felt when they struck was unbearable. She remembered the time her mother came home from waitressing, her eyes glazed over from the undeniably excessive amount of alcohol she'd drunk. The scent of it seeped out of every pore of her mother's body, and nine-year old Audrey couldn't stand the stench.

"Eilene!" Ridiculed her father.

"What? Come on now, Rodneyyy," drawled her mother as she stumbled through the foyer, untying her pale pink apron and flopping down on the worn sofa.

"This is madness!" Audrey's father continued to yell, to scream. Audrey peeked from around the corner of the foyer hallway, and her honey brown eyes welled with tears. She blinked them back, but through glossy eyes she still watched as her father strode over to her mother and landed a blow right to her face. And another. And another.

"Stop! STOP!" Audrey ran up behind her father, pounding on his back with little hands, pleading.

"Not now, Audrey!" Her father shoved her off and her body hit the wall. She huddled against it and continued to sob.

*Two feet. Two eyes. One nose. One mouth. Ten fingers. Two feet. Two feet. Two feet.*

*Breathe.*

Audrey willed herself to come back to the present, grounding herself.

*In and out in and out in out and in, in again.*

*Now run.*

Past the hardware store with nails and screws and old men who demand "I need two-by-fours, damnit, not four-by-sixes, Janice." Past the gas and grocery that sourced the entire lake and every house planted along its grassy shore. Past the lumber warehouse and the boat landing where the town kept their rickety boats that hibernated on the flat grass during autumns and winters. Past and past and past Audrey ran and ran and ran away away away from her life.

It was raining. The sky cried with her, and she appreciated that it shared her sadness. She wondered what the sky felt sorrow for. There was a full moon that night. It shone down and illuminated the newly paved streets, the biggest luxury this town had ever received. No streetlamps lined the roads, but the moon was so bright Audrey could see for miles.

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned around, looking at what she was leaving behind.

She wouldn't miss any of this.

Except for the lake. Her one place of solitude. Really, it was Big Creek all dammed up; Mr. Isaacson and the rest of the men in Reedsburg had begun its construction two years ago when she was just sixteen, confident it would boost the town and attract folk. That lake-river became her only escape. When her parents hit her, or the house lost its power for the tenth time, or there was nothing to eat that day, she always found herself at the lake. Sometimes

she felt like the lake was being constructed for her.

Everyone in town had adopted the name “Lake Redstone.” She liked it and thought it was fitting; the tall rocks of pure red that stood along the shoreline were unquestionably magnificent, and the red sand was smooth, the smoothest sand she’d ever felt. It wasn’t grainy, or scratchy. It was nearly impossible to feel an individual grain of sand, it all blended together, forming a red, dust like muck. There was no clear shoreline, so the red sand could only be felt, not seen, hidden under the murky brown water. The grass shore made miniature cliffs, and every so often a calm, rippling wave brushed up against the grassy muffin tops.

To get in the lake, there was no gradual walk in. It was a jump, from lush grass to smooth sand, and immediately water met high on the ankles. Audrey kind of felt like she was making that two-foot jump into the lake right now, except this time she was standing on a gravel road, jumping from an unknown height, and she didn’t know where or when she’d ever land.

Suddenly a car horn screeched loudly at her and bright headlights blinded her eyes.

“Ahhhh!” She screamed and jumped out of the road, arms outstretched.

“Crazy girl!” The man bellowed as he passed by in his truck.

Audrey looked up, kneeling in the damp grass on the roadside. She had been frozen in the middle of the street for who knows how long. It wasn’t a busy road; there weren’t even dashed lines painted on it. Still, no more walking in the road, she decided as she stood to her feet.

Audrey winced as she got back to her full height. Her feet hurt. Sighing, she knew she had no choice but to keep going. So, she walked down 58th Street, and didn’t look back.

After about two hours of walking in the moonlit dark, she finally reached downtown Reedsburg. There was a singular intersection with a

McDonalds, a Walgreens, and a random diner. Just past the intersection was the interstate highway. Audrey decided she’d stop to use the restroom at McDonald’s and grab some band-aids from Walgreens and then try to find a bus that would whisk her away forever.



“There,” she said to herself as she smoothed down the fourth and final bandage onto her ankle. Her socks were wet from rain, but she didn’t have any others, so she reluctantly rolled them back over her feet before putting on her worn tennis shoes.

“Now, to find a bus,” she muttered. She probably looked like a crazy person; her hair was soaked and dripping down her back, her clothes were five days unwashed, and her hands were shaking. But she kept her head down, keeping her gaze studiously on the ground as she walked more until she found a bus stop.

Eventually a bus came, a regular one with ugly, bright fabric seats that smelled of petroleum exhaust and cigarettes. Audrey didn’t check or ask anyone where it was going. She simply strode to the back of the bus and sank into the left window seat, immediately dampening the seat as the water from her clothes seeped into the fabric.

“Excuse me, Sir, what is the time?” Audrey inquired to the man two rows in front of her.

“Eleven past twelve, Miss,” his brow furrowed slightly. “My, aren’t you a bit young to be traveling alone so late at night?”

Audrey resisted the urge to roll her eyes and instead shook her hand once at the gruffly man, shooing away his invitation for what would surely be a miserable and condescending conversation. That was the last thing she remembered before she fell sound asleep.

The Sun beamed bright red through her eyelids. Audrey rubbed her eyes and woke, surveying her surroundings. She had no idea where she was or how

long she had been riding for. She certainly hoped it hadn't been more than three dollars' worth of travel. That was all she had in her measly pocket.

Audrey sat in her seat for a few more moments, brushing her fingers through her hair and pulling at tangled pieces in a lame attempt to look more presentable. After she was somewhat satisfied, she gazed out the window. As the bus continued on, they passed cornfields and rolling hills of green, with a few trees sprinkled throughout the vast area. She could see her reflection in the window, and although her dark undereyes and mangled hair were prominent, all she saw was the light in her brown eyes as she stared out at the unknown in front of her.

After about fifteen minutes, the bus veered off to an exit and paused. Audrey leapt out of her seat and bounded down the aisle, too excited to contain herself. The exit where she got off had a gas station, and she went inside.

"Hi," she said brightly to the round woman behind the front register.

"Hello," the woman politely responded. Her dust-brown hair was a frizzy mess, pulled into a low bun with pieces sticking out every which way. The dark green apron she wore had coffee stains on it, and the poor woman looked like she hadn't slept in days.

"This may sound strange, but what state are we in?" The woman gave her a puzzled look. "I just got off a bus and haven't bothered to discover where I was going," Audrey explained quickly.

"We're in Michigan, dear." The woman—Cynthia, her nametag said, replied.

"Oh, wonderful! Well, thank you!" Audrey flashed a bright smile and turned on her heel, nearly skipping out the glass doors. The sky was bright, and she felt strongly that her future was even brighter. A raven soared gracefully across the blue sky, and she watched it fly. She wondered what dead animal it would go scavenge on that night.

## **April 21, 1967: Audrey**

She never had children, but she spent the first five years of her new life in Michigan nannying for the neighborhood kids, and they became her babies. She made good money too, as she decided to settle down in a town not too far from Orchard Lake Village, an extremely wealthy area that paid four dollars an hour.

Once she turned twenty-three, she wondered if maybe she should have a husband. She was getting old, and back then most women her age would already have borne at least two children at this point. But she quickly realized she didn't care. She was happy to live a life alone and full of freedom, besides, she worried that she would give any child she raised a horrible life like the one she had grown up knowing.

So instead, once she had made enough money nannying, she sorrowfully said goodbye to the kids she loved so dearly and left Michigan.

She felt eighteen again, getting on a bus with no final destination. Except now, her beautiful golden hair with streaks of brown was beautifully curled, her honey brown eyes were full of life, and her green petticoat was pressed to perfection.

"Excuse me miss, but where are you off traveling all alone to?"

Audrey turned to look at the man a few rows in front of her and huffed a laugh. He was a magazine image of a man, but she paid him no mind. She simply waved her hand and smiled.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm quite capable."

The man's blue eyes looked down to her suitcase one more time before glancing away and turning the other direction, settling back into his seat.

## **October 11th, 1971: Audrey**

Her childhood home was too familiar. She recognized the patchy gravel driveway that jaggedly

curved behind overgrown trees, the broken front window of the house, and the sad, purple-gray painted panels that were leached of any life. She was a kid again, running out in the front yard, and a thorn on a bush pricked her leg. Dark red blood flowed slowly out of the small cut, and she smeared it with her little pointer finger. Her mother came outside then.

“Audrey, what have you done?” Her mother demanded, her skinny, shadowed figure stalking towards her.

Suddenly frightened, little Audrey stepped backwards.

“Nothing, nothing. I just got a scratch, that’s all.”

Her mother came closer, and her face began to morph into a raven’s face. Audrey was so frightened, she stumbled and tripped over the loose gravel drive.

“Audrey, honey. You are nothing but roadkill. Roadkill, roadkill, and what do you think ravens’ prey on, hmm?” Her mother taunted her, leaning over her body, her raven-face tilted at an unnatural angle. Menacing, soulless black eyes threatened to kill her right then and there.

“AHH!” Audrey gasped and sat up immediately. She looked around her motel room, and her hands clinched the white bedsheets. A cold tear glided down her flushed cheeks, and she reached up to touch it; she hadn’t even realized she was crying.

## **July 2nd, 2018: Audrey**

Audrey lived happily all over the United States for years and years. She grew older and more feeble with each passing year, but she was still the wisecrack, independent girl she once was that day she left Reedsburg.

One day, she saw a wanted poster with her name on it.

*WANTED: Audrey Bracklyn*

*Blonde hair, brown eyes, 5’5*

*Missing since July 7th, 1962*

She was shocked and immediately tore it down

before walking away. Who could possibly be looking for her? Perhaps the police were just required to send out these posters. She was on the border of Wisconsin and Illinois, planning on going on a new adventure, but she didn’t dare cross that invisible boundary into Wisconsin. That poster only pushed her farther away. Just then, a black raven flew overhead.

The nightmares continued. Over and over, she saw the house, the unkept lawn, the driveway, and her mother. Night after night she was back in that haunted house. It was an endless cycle, and eventually she could no longer bear it.

She knew that her parents were likely far gone by now, as she was seventy-four years old. Audrey decided she had to go back before she was too old and frail to ever see it. She had run from it for so long, but she knew deep down that it was what she had to do.

So, for the last time in her life, she boarded a bus.

This time, she made sure to check the destination.

## **July 4th, 2018: Audrey**

Audrey stood at the foot of her old driveway. The house looked eerily the same, like all life had left it the day she ran away, and no one had remembered its existence.

The sun had just set, and it was a warm, July night. It was Independence Day, which Audrey thought was ironic. Her whole life had become a story of independence, and here she was, back in the place where she had never had any.

Gravel crunched under her shoes, and she wrapped her white cardigan tighter around her body. She walked up the hill, up to the house. The trees were still overgrown, but she thought they looked emaciated. The leaves were dull, and branches were sharp as needles. Still, she continued up the path to the front door.

Hesitantly, she reached out for the doorknob. Audrey's cardigan was over her hand, irrationally reassuring herself it would protect her, she was nervous the house would know it was her if it felt her skin. With a creak, the knob turned, and the door swung open.

The foyer was dark. She pulled the flashlight she brought out of her pocket and clicked it on. The white light illuminated the space, and memories came flooding back to her. The coffee table that her father threw across the hallway. The countless dents in the wall from nights filled with anger. She didn't know if she could take it standing here. Panicked, Audrey gasped for breath. She tapped her fingers rhythmically and counted back from ten. She tried to take a step forward, but she was frozen in place.

Then she heard a scream.

Audrey turned around to find a little girl staring back at her.

"ESMERALDA!" The girl shrieked and ran.

"Wa-wait!" Audrey yelled after the girl, confused. She clamored down the front door steps and ran after the girl. Why had she called her that strange name?

Behind the trees, she saw the girl hugging who appeared to be her father, her chin tucked into his chest, her little back raising up and down with every inhale and exhale. She looked to be about eight years old. Other people, children and one other man, were surrounding them, looking as confused as she was.

Then the man holding the girl saw her. He took in a short breath and picked up his daughter.

And then he apologized.

"I'm sorry. We didn't know there was someone living here," he explained. "This house has been abandoned for years."

"It's-it's alright," Audrey said hesitantly. She stood about twenty feet away, still up the hill. Her legs were shaking. "No one lives here. Well, not anymore. I used to live here, but I left in 1962."

Audrey's gaze went to the girl still in her fathers' arms. "Please tell the girl I'm not going to hurt her," she said.

The father turned to the girl, "It's okay, Kier."

Her brown eyes peeked out from over her father's shoulder. Audrey waved tentatively.

"Are you Esmeralda?" asked the girl.

"I'm sorry," the father said again before Audrey could respond. "Over the last five years or so we've come here to have some fun and scare the kids a bit. We live just down the street, and my brother and I—" he gestured to the other man, "have called this Esmeralda's house. She's a little old lady, but really a creepy witch who scares her victims."

Audrey's white eyebrows pinched in slight concern. And then she burst out laughing.

"Oh, that is remarkable! So, you all must think I am Esmeralda!" Audrey laughed and laughed, and she wasn't even sure why.

"My name is Audrey. Audrey Bracklyn. I went missing from this town in 1962, and this was my house. I had my reasons for leaving, and I simply came back because, well, I'm getting old, and I figured I needed to face the horrible things I experienced here years ago."

"I see," the man said. "My name is Ryan Sullivan. And we're sorry to have disturbed your return to your childhood home. We won't visit anymore."

"No! Please," Audrey found herself saying. "I actually appreciate that my house has been able to become a fun memory of make-believe for your family. I was terrified of what I'd find here, thinking I wouldn't be able to grapple with it. But knowing you all have been here, reshaping this place into stories and fun..." Audrey took a breath. "It means a lot to me, actually. This house isn't haunted anymore."

And I'll happily be your Esmeralda," Audrey smiled softly.

Kieran slipped out of her father's hold, and

walked over to Audrey. She wrapped her arms around her and held as tightly as she could.

“Esmeralda isn’t scary,” she said, “Esmeralda is kind.”

A tear ran down Audrey’s cheek. Overhead, an eagle flew by, and Audrey watched the strong bird

soar. That was her, she thought. She knew it. Her parents couldn’t haunt her anymore. She was fully free, right back in the place where she had been caged her whole life.

“Thank you,” Audrey said, and she hugged the girl back.