

TLC Showcase

BOBBIE JEAN HUFF

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Introduction to *The Ones We Keep*

You can't undo the past. But can you live as if it never happened?

A quiet lakeside resort in Vermont seems like the perfect summer getaway for Olivia and Harry and their young sons. But in a single moment, their idyllic family retreat becomes a mother's worst nightmare. Returning from a solo hike one afternoon, Olivia learns from a passing stranger that one of her sons has drowned—but not which one. In that moment, Olivia makes a panicked decision that will change her family forever. If she never knows which son has died, can she convince herself that none of them have? By shielding herself from reality, can she continue to live in a world where all three boys are still alive?

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The idea for *The Ones We Keep* came when our family was staying at a resort with our four young sons. Coming back from a walk, I looked across the lake to where they were playing in the water and thought, What if...? What would I do? Years later the thought re-emerged. I wrote it first as a short story, but people who read it kept asking, And then what? That enthusiasm kept me expanding it, until it outgrew its short story status.

The remaining hurdle was to convince myself that I would not be viewed as too old to be published. After all, first novels seldom succeed, and how many novels can someone who should not be buying green bananas produce? But at the age of seventy-six (there, I finally outed myself, having not wanted to publicly announce this for so long), I am still asking myself, "Can this be real?"

I sent the novel first to Allyson Latta, my Canadian editor extraordinaire, and then to TLC, where it was assigned to Anna South. I will be forever grateful for the enthusiasm Anna showed for my prose, for her thoughtful guidance, and especially for giving me the confidence to believe in myself enough to start on the road that has led to the publication of *The Ones We Keep* by Sourcebooks in January 2022.

For this showcase I have chosen an excerpt that will, I hope, provide insight into Olivia's mind shortly after she realizes that in order to save herself, she must leave home forever.

Extract from *The Ones We Keep* by Bobbie Jean Huff

The heat rushes to envelop her as she steps off the bus and into the station: New York City in August. Fatigue assails her as she makes her way up the escalator and takes her place in the line that snakes out of the door of the ladies' room. Once inside, she notices two women, each with a shopping cart overflowing with plastic bags and tattered blankets. One of the two is squatting beside her cart in the corner at the end of a bank of toilets, fanning herself with the torn-out section of a magazine. The other is at one of the sinks splashing water into her armpits.

After using the toilet, Olivia takes her own place beside the woman at the sinks. Pulling a comb from her backpack, she drags it through her hair, knotting it in a roll at the back. Then she washes her face with cold water and blots it with a paper towel. She's feeling slightly light-headed, from heat or hunger or just plain fatigue.

The woman beside her buttons her shirt, then wheels her cart back to the corner opposite where the other woman is squatting. Are they friends? It doesn't appear that way, although they are of similar age and equally decrepit. Olivia remembers reading about them recently, the women who inhabit that bathroom. The article said there was no official attempt to oust them. Olivia was surprised to read that, and glad. She can't imagine what their lives must be like, other than the obvious—that they each must have left a situation more untenable than the Port Authority ladies' room.

At a bakery on the main concourse she picks at a bagel and downs a cup of lukewarm coffee. Then she joins the line to buy a ticket for a bus she barely has time to catch. A little more than an hour later she's pulling up to the house in a cab. Leaving the backpack, she asks the cabbie to wait, she won't be long.

It's eight thirty in the morning by the time she stumbles up the walkway to the front door, where she removes a key from beneath a pot of wilting geraniums. But before inserting it in the lock she stops, imagining for a moment that they are all there, in their beds, asleep. It is, oddly, an easy thing to believe.

Turning the key, she pushes open the door and goes straight upstairs. Without even glancing into her children's bedrooms, she enters her own. And there it is, hanging

on the wall opposite the bed. The boy leaning over the wall. The trees. The red-roofed houses. The man in the boat. The water and the gray sky.

She lifts the picture from the bottom to judge its weight. It's surprisingly light. Removing it carefully from the wall, she carries it down to the kitchen, where she places it on the counter while she rummages in the cabinet for paper bags and scissors and tape. When her task is complete, she carries the wrapped painting to the front hallway and sets it beside the door.

Then she returns upstairs and, barely allowing herself to breathe, enters each of her children's rooms. In Brian's she grabs his Cub Scout hat from the top of his dresser. From Andrew's room she takes a small piece of his purple fuzzy blanket. And from Rory's little bed, his nylon bear, the one he wouldn't stop screaming for when he spied it on a shelf in Kresge's. She runs her hand over his pillow. Perhaps she will curl up in his bed, just for a minute. She draws the quilt back and pulls it over herself.

When, exactly, had it happened? While she was walking along the path through the trees, thinking about how happy she was, how her life seemed, all of a sudden, to have achieved perfection—or the closest thing to it? Did it happen when she was eating her sandwiches, drinking her cold tea? Or lying asleep on the flat rock beneath the sun, as if she hadn't a care in the world, as if she alone had been singled out—by God or fate or good fortune—for a future untouched by grief or blame or loss?

And how? How had it happened? Was he—her nameless, dead child—left alone in the cabin? Did he slip out the door and walk by himself to the lake? Was he in the water with the other children, playing with the plastic toys and attended to by a lifeguard who in a split second—while he bent to scratch his ankle, perhaps, or turned to greet the pretty girl he was hooking up with after work—failed to notice when a small boy slipped beneath the surface of the water and didn't come up?

If some god—or evil force—had chosen that particular ending for her son, he couldn't have accomplished it more brilliantly. Olivia thinks about the various components that needed to be assembled in order to achieve the goal, to deprive a child of his life. There was the timing of her own walk, which was of course dependent on the weather. There were the choices, by the resort, of that particular babysitter and that particular lifeguard. There was the timing of the tennis match between Harry and the accountant from Cleveland—and Olivia could only imagine his story. Perhaps

he could only play at ten because his wife was wanting him to accompany her to the little tea shop in town where she'd spotted, the previous day, the most precious china dog...

She stares up at the ceiling. If she stays here long enough, if she remains in this bed and in this house, she will eventually find out what happened—and who it happened to. She remembers her Sunday school teacher saying once, "You're only given what you can bear." At the time, Olivia had believed it. But now she knows how wrong her teacher was. Sometimes you are given more than you can bear—and if you are, can you be faulted for taking the only course of action that you can see? For trying to save yourself, the only way you know how?

Couldn't a tragic death be so life-wrenching, so cataclysmic, that the manifestations of ordinary grief—if any grief could be called ordinary—are unavailable or impossible?

In the street a car door slams, and, a moment after that, the doorbell rings. The cabbie, Olivia thinks, and, throwing the quilt aside, she opens a window and shouts down. Then she goes back to her own room, where she pulls a large suitcase from the closet, and after filling it with as many of her clothes as she can, she stuffs in the three items belonging to her children. She feels beneath the jewelry box on her dresser and finds—with relief—five one-hundred-dollar bills. Moments later she's back in the cab. As the cabbie pulls out of the driveway and proceeds down the street, Olivia closes her eyes tight, to keep herself from looking back at her receding life.

About the Writer

Bobbie Jean Huff began writing when she was in her thirties and living in the British Columbia interior. For a long time, the idea of publishing anything escaped her. Eventually she began submitting short stories for publication. The Canadian magazine *Event* published "Miss Sally," which was based on a period in her early twenties when she ended up (involuntarily) in a New York psychiatric clinic, where the story takes place. Then she won a Canada-wide fiction competition for "Sing Me Anything," published by *Queen's Alumni Review*. These and other published essays and poems are reproduced on her website: www.bobbiejeanhuff.com/selected-writings. (And for those who venture there, Ms. Atwood has still not returned her hat.)



She had always wanted to write a novel, and threw several attempts in the trash, but eventually she realized that if you can write the small scenes of a story, you can make them coalesce into a larger plot.

The Ones We Keep was shortlisted for the 2019 Dzanc Prize for Fiction and was semi-finalist in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom 2019 Creative Writing Competition. A recipient of grants from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, Bobbie Jean has written for *The Globe and Mail*, *Quarry*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Room of One's Own*, *Anthos*, and the *New Ohio Review*.

Bobbie Jean lives in Pennington, New Jersey. She has recently completed her second novel (working title *Olivia, Turning*), a novella called *Keeping Track*, and is currently working on the sequel to *The Ones We Keep*.