

Handful of Pencils fiction collection is for readers seeking a short creative interlude. The stories are varied and include settings in Spain, Italy, England, and America. Read one story at a time, or all of them at once.

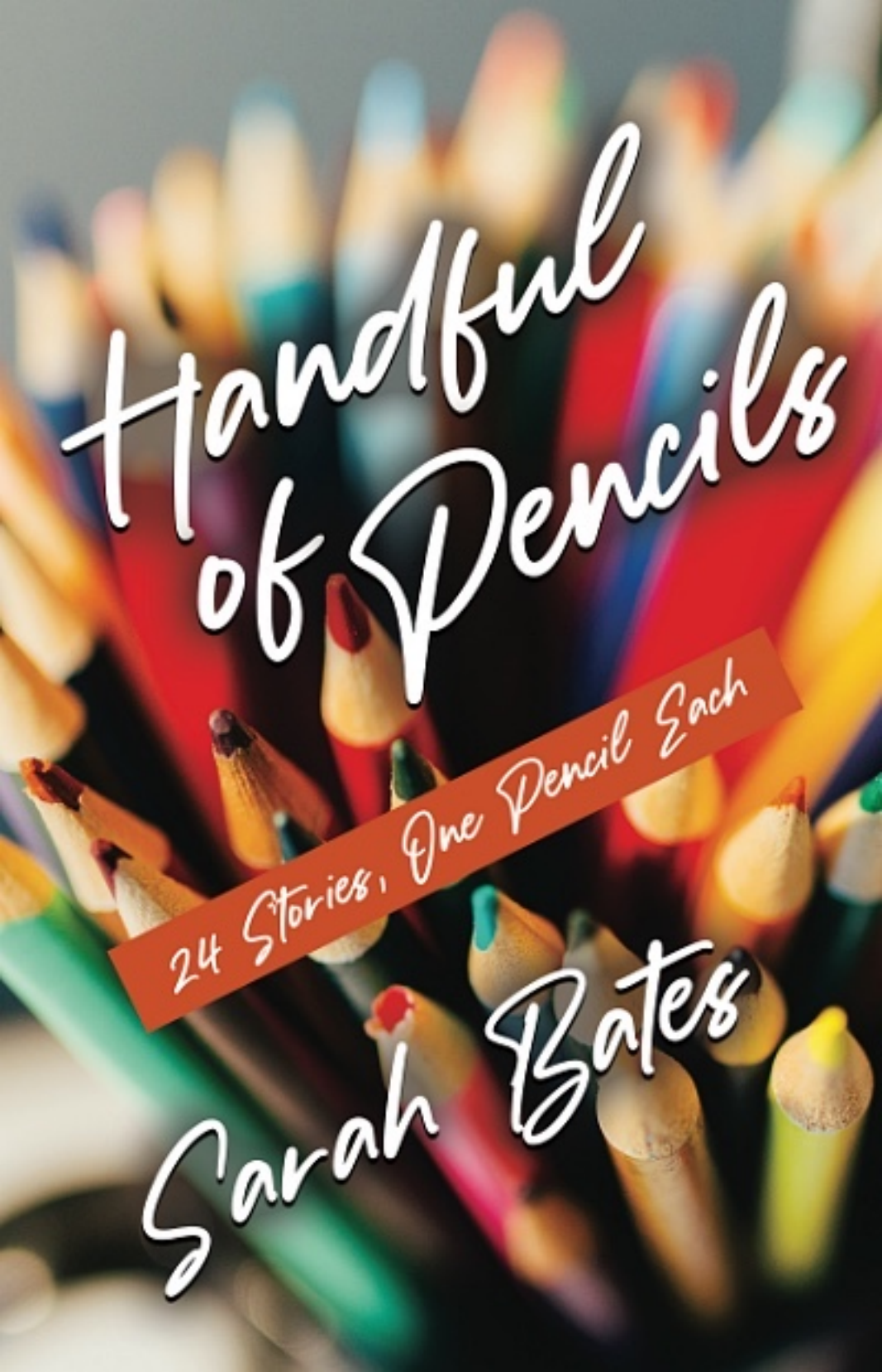
Handful of Pencils

By Sarah Bates

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Handful of Pencils

24 Stories, One Pencil Each

Sarah Bates

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Red Dirt

“What’s so great about Alabama?” I asked for the umpteenth time. I squinted into the sun, trying to see Daddy’s face. His body blocked the heat scorching the train station platform. Sending us to Alabama in July for vacation was his idea. I wasn’t sure I wanted to go. He squatted down to peer into my eyes.

“Well, Rose Ann, you and Ruby Lee can run through green grass taller’n you, lay under a Scuppernong arbor and pull grapes right off the vine into your mouth, and pack that red Alabama dirt over your hand to make toad caves just like I did when I was your age. That dirt’s real red, real purty,” he said. He gave me a big ol’ Daddy smile his eyes looking up at the sky like he was seeing himself hunkered down on Grandpa’s farm that very minute.

“If it’s so wonderful why aren’t you going too?” He put old Aunt Thelma in charge. She’d been taking care of us since our mother died last year.

“Wish I could go, but I got to work. You girls will have fun goin’ on the train. All y’all say “hey” to Grandma and Grandpa, and mind your Aunt Thelma, y’hear?”

I stuck my head out the train window, watching him, until his last wave vanished in a mirage of heat rising off the pavement. I still wasn’t convinced.

The train clanked across the flat Arizona desert, swaying like a fat lady whose thighs bulged from second helpings. Inside our scuffed and faded compartment, the air smelled of cigars, saddle-soaped leather, and sweat.

“You girls get down off them seats and sit down,” Aunt Thelma said, grabbing the hem of my dress. Stringy arms and a cripple, my Daddy’s sister was a spinster born with one leg shorter than the other, but she was strong. I minded her when I had to. Ruby Lee and I plopped down on our bench seat and slid across on it on our cotton patties backward and forward until we were scooped up smack together against the varnished wall of the train car. I shoved her and she yelped her special little fakey attention cry.

She pinched me. I pinched her back, harder.

“Ow!” she said.

“Rose Ann, “I saw that!” Aunt Thelma’s look was tired and familiar. Her lips shrunk up like she’d tasted a sour pickle. Her right eyebrow shot up above her glasses then she reached over and jerked us apart.

“You girls.”

Ruby Lee thrust her face forward, staring at me, her little blue dot eyes crossed tight up against the bridge of her nose.

“Your face is gonna stick like that,” I said glaring at my little sister. She made a screwed-up prissy mouth and stuck out her tongue.

“She’s making faces at me.” I said, hoping Aunt Thelma would pull Ruby Lee’s ear like she did sometimes, and yank her up and smack her one on her behind.

Instead, Aunt Thelma grabbed our hands and with that one eyebrow up again looked from my face to Ruby Lee’s. “I promised your daddy I’d take care of you girls all the way to Alabama,” she said. “I’m fixin’ to do that.” Her pickle mouth

smiled. "You can't devil me into forgetting that promise." Then her smiley face turned sour again as she looked at me.

"Stop pickin' at her Rose Ann. You are seven. Ruby Lee, three. You know better. Take care of little sister, y'hear?" I nodded, knowing I'd pushed too far. "You go sit yonder. She pointed to the other end of her seat, "and mind your own business."

I grabbed my book of Bible stories and tried to concentrate on the puzzlement of Jesus and those fishes but the leather train seat stuck to my legs, hot and sweaty like when you lick a stamp and touch the licked place with your finger.

Ruby Lee pulled her Raggedy Anne to her chest, slumped down on the seat across from me, and started that kicking thing she does. Her foot going back and forth, back and forth until she's so tired she falls asleep. Her baby cheeks were flushed, and her streaky apricot hair stuck to her forehead. Aunt Thelma spit on her hanky and wiped Ruby Lee's face, then reached for me.

"Don't put any of that old spit on me," I said, ducking my head. Her hands fell into her lap, and she turned to rest her forehead on the window glass. The back of her neck was all wet where she'd poked pins into her hair to keep it rolled up. A damp stain between her shoulder blades turned her pink dress scarlet. Her short leg, the one with the big shoe that made the rest of her walk straight up nudged the worn linoleum floor, rocking her body. Asleep in the corner of the train seat, Ruby Lee snuffle snored, her hair stuck stiff to her face where the spit had dried. Her head rested on Raggedy Ann's face right smack on that little white triangle in Raggedy's black eye.

“What do you see, Aunt Thelma?” I tugged at the plaits of my braid. Soon my brown hair would stick out from my head like those little ribbon curls you make with scissors for birthday presents.

“Cactus, white sand, yellor weeds, and not much else.”

I could barely hear her. “How will we know we’re in Alabama, Aunt Thelma?”

“When out this here train window I see green grass and that pretty red dirt.”

Her voice seemed less tired, kind of hopeful. She was going home. I was going home, too, I realized. My daddy’s home, in Alabama. Home of green grass and red dirt.

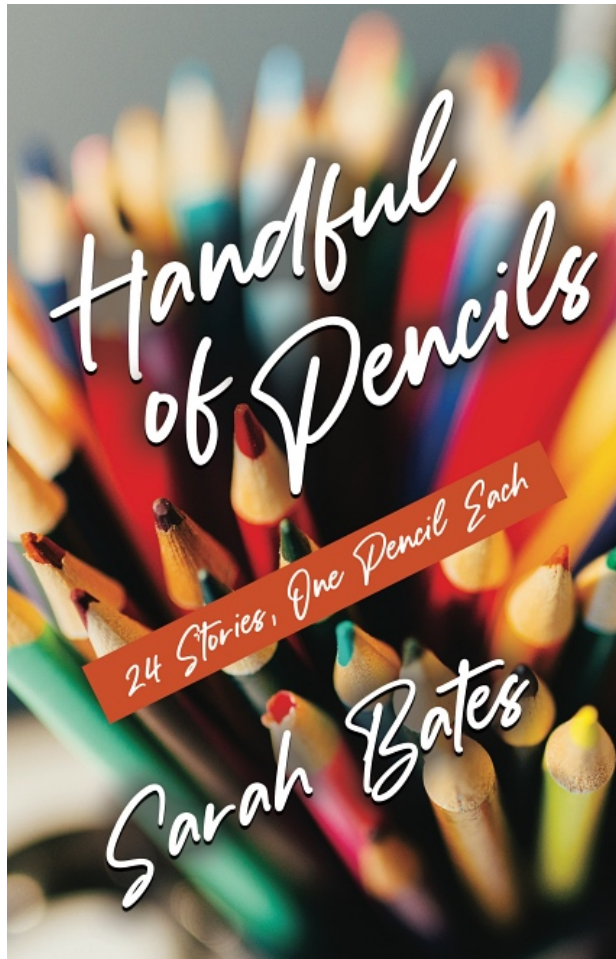
I slid over to rest my head on Aunt Thelma’s shoulder. Her arm smelled like sweet soap and baby powder. I put my thumb in my mouth and thought of wondrous dirt the color of a Cardinal’s wing as I felt the light going out of my eyes.

Thoughts on Short Stories

Short story writing is an escape for authors—a moment of freedom to investigate a new fictional world. For me, these stories come to life while writing full-length novels. To prepare for these flights of imagination, I have pencils stashed all over the house, in my writing room, handbag, and car. With a handful of pencils, I'm ready to scribble an idea or introduce a character. I liken the process to people who linger in my brain, waiting to come alive. Sometimes their voices are a babel competing for my time. When I pause to listen and one voice captures my attention, I grab a pencil because a story has begun to take shape. I then write as fast as possible, stopping only to cross out a word and choose a better one. When my hand tires, my eyes burn, or a character merely needs a break, I stop writing for the day. We'll start fresh in the morning. The stories are varied. The characters are people facing life in their own remarkable way. Each one placed a pencil in my hand to create their story.

My writer's group Carmi Cosmos, Kara LaRussa, and Dan Feltham vetted these stories and encouraged me. I thank them for their valuable input.

I have also published two novels, *Twenty-One Steps of Courage*, *The Lost Diaries of Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, and a short story collection with Carmi Cosmos, *Out of Our Minds*, *Wild Stories by Wild Women*.



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