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| C:\Users\alingenfelter\Desktop\628x471.jpg | **Vocabulary** |
| **Drifter- (noun)** someone who wanders from place to place without a destination or home. |
| **Alias- (noun)** a fake name. |
| **Indistinguishable- (adj.)** impossible to distinguish, or tell the difference between. |
| **Defraud- (verb)** to trick or cheat (fraud) someone/something to get money. |
| **Foster care- (noun)** a government-sponsored system that places children whose parents are unable to care for them in the care/home of others. |
| **Delusional- (adj.)** believing/imagining things that don’t exist or that are untrue; “out of touch with reality.” |
| **Inconsolable- (adj.)** unable to find ways to feel better, especially from others; very sad. |
| **Emancipated- (adj.)** freed; given full legal rights as an adult. |
| **Runaway- (noun)** someone who has run away/escaped from his/her guardians/family. |
| **Pursue- (verb)** to look for; to seek; to chase. |
| **Forgery- (noun)** the act of signing with a fake signature/name. |
| **Objection- (noun)** expression of disagreement. |

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**“Forever Young:” The Story of Treva Throneberry**

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Treva Throneberry sits across from me, smiling shyly as if she is embarrassed to be seen here. We are in the visiting room in the Clark County Jail in Vancouver, Washington, looking at each other through a thick window on which someone has scrawled ”I Love You.” We speak to each other through telephone receivers. We are talking about high school. She remembers first-period history class, when she would sometimes fall asleep with her head down. “The teacher would bang on the desk to wake me up,” Throneberry says. She raps on the surface of the prison table, mimicking him.

The history class with its rude awakenings happened at Evergreen High School in Vancouver, Canada. Throneberry appeared in the principal's office in the late summer of 1997, a fresh-faced girl without any school records, a runaway who had been taken in off the streets by a local Christian family. Her name, she said, was Brianna Stewart, and she was, she said, 16 years old.

The administrators at Evergreen paused momentarily over the gaps in her story, but they didn't pause for long. Her claims were easy to believe: she looked like a lost girl who needed help. She was admitted into Evergreen's sophomore class.

In fact, that fall, Treva Throneberry was 28 years old. She was a con artist and a **drifter** who had been moving from city to city for the previous 10 years, using various **aliases**, always claiming to be a teenager. But it would be three more years before anyone would discover the real truth about Brianna Stewart.

Once she enrolled at Evergreen, a huge suburban high school, she became part of its stream of 2,000 students, **indistinguishable** from the teenage mob. Her imitation of a teenager was so effective that for a while the world was fooled. Like any high schooler, she walked down the hallways clutching her books to her chest and covered her notebooks with doodles as teachers spoke. She joined the tennis team, found a boyfriend, and went to the Sweethearts Social. She memorized lines for a bit part in a production of “Man of La Mancha” and wrote emotional short stories for English class.

Ultimately, DNA tests and fingerprints linked her without doubtto her real name, to Treva Throneberry. She was eventually convicted of **defrauding** the Washington public school and **foster care** systems of $19,400. Yet despite her conviction, she still claims, even today, to be Brianna Stewart. She swears that this is all a grand mistake, a conspiracy, a waste of everybody's time. She is not **delusional**. She has been tested and retested and found to be mentally competent. She knows where she is and why. But she is unwilling, or unable, to let go of her fake story.

I stare at her through the glass. I don't see any signs of age: her skin is without wrinkles; her hair shows no traces of gray. There is warmth in her character, hopefulness. I can see why people believed her troubled-teen story; I almost believe her, too. “I am Brianna,” she says, her voice full of anxiety. “I am 19, almost 20. I can remember being me since I was 4 years old.”

She was born to Carl and Patsy Throneberry in Wichita Falls, Texas, and grew up in the nearby town of Electra. Her father worked in the oil fields. Her sisters describe her family as peaceful and loving, but the stories Treva used to tell about her early life, before she changed her identity, centered on abuse committed by her father. At the age of 15, she filed charges against him, which she later withdrew.

As a consequence of the abuse **allegations**, Treva Throneberry was removed from her parents' home at age 16 in 1985 and, through the state foster care system, placed in the home of Sharon Gentry, a sweet woman with a wide, forgiving face. Gentry says there was a sadness in the girl that she could not penetrate; she took Treva on trips to tourist attractions and tried to cheer her up, she says, but Treva was **inconsolable**. When she was 17, Treva ran away from home and was later found walking alone along a highway. Afterward, she spent a brief period in a mental hospital.

At age 18, Throneberry was able to cut herself loose from both the foster care system and the mental health system -- in the words of the court, she was “**emancipated**.” She rented an apartment in Arlington, Texas, a suburb of Fort Worth, where she worked as a maid cleaning hotels. Gentry visited occasionally, hoping that the girl had recovered from her sadness and was excited about her future. But sometime in 1987, Throneberry left town without a word to anyone. She disappeared from beneath the name Treva Throneberry and its associated history, like someone leaving behind the house she was born into.

She has been known by many names since that time. Her list of aliases includes Cara Leanna Davis, Emily Kara Williams, Keili Smitt and Stephanie Lewis. She has lived in four different cities and three states in the USA. Wherever she went, she presented herself -- usually at a church -- as a **runaway** teenager in need of shelter. She never stayed in any one town long enough to grow up inside the alias; she never allowed herself to age. She always ran away again before much time had passed.

It was adolescence that Treva Throneberry **pursued** as persistently as she pursued new cities and new names; when she boarded buses and disappeared from her last known address, staying in adolescence was always the destination she was traveling toward. As the years passed, true adolescence faded further into her past, but she did not want to give up on the idea of rediscovering it, of occupying it once again.

“The young lady that I knew of as Treva did not see herself living beyond the age of 18,” Gentry said in court. Throneberry was fixated on 18 as some kind of Rubicon she could not cross; she didn't believe in her own existence after that threshold. Whenever she came close to reaching that age, she backed away from it, left town and started over as a 15- or 16- or 17-year-old, a girl before the age of consent. While the courts considered 18 the point of emancipation, she saw it as the point of disappearing.

When Treva Throneberry arrived in Vancouver, she quickly found her way to a huge modern church called Glad Tidings. One of the secretaries there took her in, took her to Evergreen High School and helped her enroll. Once enrolled, she drifted among the high school groups, sometimes hanging out with tennis-team girls, sometimes with a girl she had met in one of the foster homes she shuttled between. She was drawn to the loud, brightly dressed theater crowd -- that species of extrovert that can be found in virtually every school, class clowns and divas, first in line for play tryouts. Brianna Stewart followed these kids around, sometimes eating lunch in the theater where they ate. She even performed in a few plays, although her parts were mostly minor -- two or three lines spoken in her small voice.

For homework, she wrote research reports on “Society's Missing Youth” and “Problem Behaviors in Youth.” For a “life skills” class, she proposed a project interviewing homeless youth, but on the day it was due, she told her teacher the tapes had come out blank. Instead, she wrote about her own street life, whether it was true or not-- trying to stay dry in the rain by sitting under the awnings of jewelry stores and being awoken by police at 3 a.m. as she slept in doorways. The teacher gave her an A.

Nobody at Evergreen questioned Brianna's identity. Teachers who noticed tiredness in her behavior dismissed it as the exhaustion of homelessness, not adulthood. They were trained to look for kids who were high on drugs or violent, but they weren't trained to look for kids who weren't kids at all. Like many girls, Brianna moved a little awkwardly in her body, hiding inside baggy clothes. She looked away if anyone looked too closely into her eyes.

The rules and rigidity of high-school life must have made Throneberry feel safe. She describes her first year at Evergreen as successful. “I had friends,” she says. “I was really happy.” Sometimes she would be invited along as groups of girls headed out to Vancouver Mall after school or on weekends.

Because everyone in high school is to some extent putting on an act, even those who came close to Brianna and felt suspicious of her age ignored their suspicions pretty easily. Allison Heyman, a tennis teammate, remembers, “She looked like she was older and trying to act younger, but I didn't think she really was, or that it could be possible!”

One thing bothered Allison and the other girls on the tennis team: Brianna's hairdo. This was a fashion “don’t” at Evergreen: the two pigtails seemed “really weird” to the girls on the team, and they would hold small conferences about what could possibly motivate her to wear them every single day. “We definitely thought that was strange,” Heyman says.

If the girls thought Brianna seemed a little weird, there was one boy who she really impressed. Fifteen-year-old Ken Dunn met Brianna in the school's sports-medicine office. He had really been wanting a girlfriend, and in Brianna, it seemed, she had arrived.

One day Brianna invited Ken to attend church with her at Glad Tidings. Ken agreed, and soon they were a regular pair every Sunday in the pews. During their church dates, Ken started to feel the stirrings of first love. “One Sunday, it hits me, and I have this feeling,” he recalls. “I can't get it out of my mind. Brianna is all I think about. It took me forever to tell her that I love her, but I finally did.”

Afterward, Brianna and Ken were officially “going steady” -- which meant Ken's mom drove them to movies, and they held hands in the hall at school and wrote valentines to each other. As their relationship deepened, Ken and Brianna talked about all manner of heavy topics, sitting around in coffee places getting dizzy from refills. They talked about God and how they were pretty sure they believed in him. Brianna said how hard her life had been. She told stories of murder, rape and drugs. Her mother was dead, she said, killed by her father. Her past sounded like a horror movie to Ken, and as he listened, he felt intimidated by her: all he had ever done was live in his parents' house, and the only violence he had ever endured was on the football field with his grunting teammates. Brianna's stories added a layer of importance and deepness to his life. “It was really intense,'” he says.

Ken and Brianna's teenage love persisted for quite a while, from the beginning of 10th grade to the middle of 11th. They went to the Homecoming Dance together -- Brianna wore a gold dress and a crown; Ken wore a vest and gave her a corsage. A photograph shows them beaming like a bride and groom. Ken remembers slow-dancing to Shania Twain, and he says it was one of the greatest nights of his life.

Bit by bit, though, things began to fall apart for Brianna. As time closed in on graduation day, the sadness Sharon Gentry had seen surfaced once again -- the fear of life after 18, of an adult realm in which she couldn't imagine herself. She and Ken grew apart after he got the lead part in the play “Fiddler on the Roof,” and they eventually broke up.

Still clearly hurt by their breakup, even as she sits in jail, Throneberry provides her side in the “he said/she said” of their final days, which they both refer to as the period after Ken “got Fiddler.” “He became too important for me after he got the part,” she says. “I think I was too fat for him or something.”

Treva Throneberry was finally picked up by police at a Y.W.C.A. shelter in the spring of 2000 and booked on **fraud** and **forgery** charges. The clue that brought her down was one trace of her old self she could not escape: her own fingerprint, which she had submitted when applying for a Social Security card. To this day, she claims there is a mix-up between her fingerprint and “this Treva person's'” print. She was assigned a public defender, whom she eventually fired; she refused negotiations because she didn't want to appear guilty. She was examined by a psychiatrist and found competent to stand trial, and when she finally arrived in court, she represented herself as Brianna Stewart. On the day of her trial, Throneberry made her opening statements to the jury, trying to prove she was 19-year-old Brianna Stewart. Over the course of three days, she made **objections** and strong, though unsuccessful, arguments: sheobjected when Sharon Gentry talked about how sad Treva had seemed; she objected when anyone talked about her mental state. She has repeatedly insisted “there is nothing wrong with my mental capacity,” and “I don't have any personality disorders that would cause distortion of reality.”

Despite her claims, Throneberry was convicted of defrauding the state and was sentenced to a three-year term at the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, Washington.

It is possible that if she'd never been arrested, Throneberry would have allowed herself to grow up this time. As Brianna, she had managed to turn 19 without running; she didn't flee Vancouver at the end of her adolescence, as she had in so many other towns. It seems this time she was willing to cross the border into adulthood, to graduate from high school and face her fear that she could not exist past 18. At the time of her arrest, she had enrolled in a university, and she was talking about becoming a lawyer.

Found in her belongings was a spiral notebook with “I AM 18!” written in large balloon letters across the cover. Maybe she wrote the message as a reminder to herself; maybe it was written in disbelief; maybe the exclamation mark indicates joy that she had actually arrived at this fearful age, when all minors are emancipated and the unknown future beckons. Treva Throneberry delayed facing this future for more than a decade, and in the course of wandering, she found a home in the perpetual state of identity crisis that is high school.