Locate me in a swing. Metal, porch type, upholstered in orange-striped canvas by my mother. I am spending the summer. My sixteenth, but the first I have spent in a swing. I could say I'm here because I have a broken leg (it’s true I do have pain) or ear trouble or a very strict father. I could say I like to be alone, that I'm cultivating my mind, that I'm meditating on the state of the universe. I could say a lot of things, but nobody listens when I talk, so I don't. Talk. Not often, anyway. And it worries people.

My mother, for instance. She hovers. She lights in a chair by the banister and stares at me periodically. She wears a blue-checked housedress or a green one under the apron I gave her for Christmas with a purple rickrack on the hem. She clutches a dustcloth or a broom handle or the woman's section of the Windsor Chronicle.

"Marilyn," she says, "a girl your age should be up and doing things."

Doing things to her is sweeping out the garage or mending all my underwear. Doing things to me is swimming, hanging on the back of a motorcycle, water-skiing. To her, a girl my age is an apprentice woman in training for three meals a day served on time and shiny kitchen linoleum, but she would be happy to see me dancing the funky chicken if it would get me on my feet.

I stay prone. I don't want to do her kind of thing, and I can't do mine. The fact is, I don't fit anywhere right now. Except in a swing. So here I am, reading.

My father arrives in the evening. He was worked all day in an office
where the air conditioner is broken, or with a client who decides at five minutes to five to invest with another company. He flops in the wicker chair and communes with my mother's ghost.

"Marilyn," he says, "a pretty girl like you ought to realize how lucky she is."

Lucky to him is being sixteen with nothing to worry about. My father grew up in Utopia, where everyone between two and twenty dwelt in perpetual joy. If he were sixteen now he would have a motorcycle and a beautiful girl riding behind him. But it wouldn't be me. If he were sixteen and not my father, he wouldn't look at me twice.

From time to time my friend comes. I give her half the swing and she sits like a guru and pops her gum. She can do that and still look great. When she blinks, boys fall dead.

"Marilyn," she says, "a girl like you needs a lot of experience with different men."

She will get me a date with her cousin. With her sister-in-law's brother. With the preacher's nephew from Syracuse. She will fix me up in the back seat of a car with someone like myself, and we will eat popcorn and watch the drive-in movie and wish it were time to go home.

I could say, *I'm not that kind of girl.* I could say, *Someone should be kissing me madly, buying me violets, throwing himself in front of Amtrak for want of my careless glance.*

Who would listen?

So, I say, "No." I say, "Maybe next week." Then I lie in the swing and watch the stars come out and wonder why I didn't go.
Notes

This is one of my favorite exercises to start with. The structure is clear and the content is universally relatable. Who doesn’t remember being an adolescent who felt alone and misunderstood?

One of the great things about the "Best American Short Stories" series is that at the back of the book they include the contributor's notes. In the notes for "Nobody Listens When I Talk" Ms. Sanford says that she did spend a few summers in a swing because she had an ear problem and couldn't swim with her friends. She did read a lot. But "the true heart of the story came out of my need to identify the girl in the swing, to put together who she was from what other people thought of her and what she thought of herself."

So, how does she set about doing this?

She starts with a captivating voice, which captures an adolescent perspective. She is telling the story through the eyes of the 16-year-old girl. At no point do we feel that she is looking back at herself from years later. The whole story is in the present tense. We are just there with Marilyn in the swing, seeing what she sees, listening to her thoughts and fantasies.

Look at the sentence structure in that first paragraph: *Locate me in a swing. Metal, porch-type, upholstered in orange-striped canvas by my mother. And I could say a lot of things, but nobody listens when I talk, so I don’t. Talk. Not often, anyway.* The abrupt sentences and sentence fragments are unusual. They attract attention and create a kind of rhythm, drawing the reader in. It’s also a very concrete way to start the story: a very clear setting, with enough visual details that we can really picture where the girl is.

Sanford then sets up a very clear structure, in which she introduces us to three different characters, all of whom have their own idea about who Marilyn is. A paragraph introducing the character, a quote, a paragraph showing how Marilyn relates (or rather, doesn’t relate) to what she was just told. Notice the repetition in the language: *a girl your age* (says the mother), *a pretty girl like you* (says the father), *a girl like you* (says the friend).

The story stays lighthearted with lines like *She would be happy to see me dance the funky chicken if it would get me on my feet and she sits like a guru and pops her gum* and *When she blinks, boys fall dead.* There are many more lighthearted, whimsical moments like these as the story continues. And yet, you can feel her deep pain in moments like, *If he were sixteen and not my father, he wouldn’t look at me twice.*
Exercise

Think about yourself (or a character from something you’ve written) as an adolescent. Create a captivating, quirky, 1st person voice that is relating the way they see the world from their vantage point. Try out Sanford’s style of using short, abrupt sentences and/or fragments. You can even try starting with the line, Locate me in __________. Then introduce three characters who were in your life – it’s fine to use mother, father, and friend, as Sanford did, or you can come up with three different characters. Show their perspective of your narrator and your narrator’s perspective of him/herself.

Every detail you include should be revealing of who your narrator is. Think about what Sanford said - "the true heart of the story came out of my need to identify the girl in the swing, to put together who she was from what other people thought of her and what she thought of herself." How can you show, in this concise manner, who your narrator was?