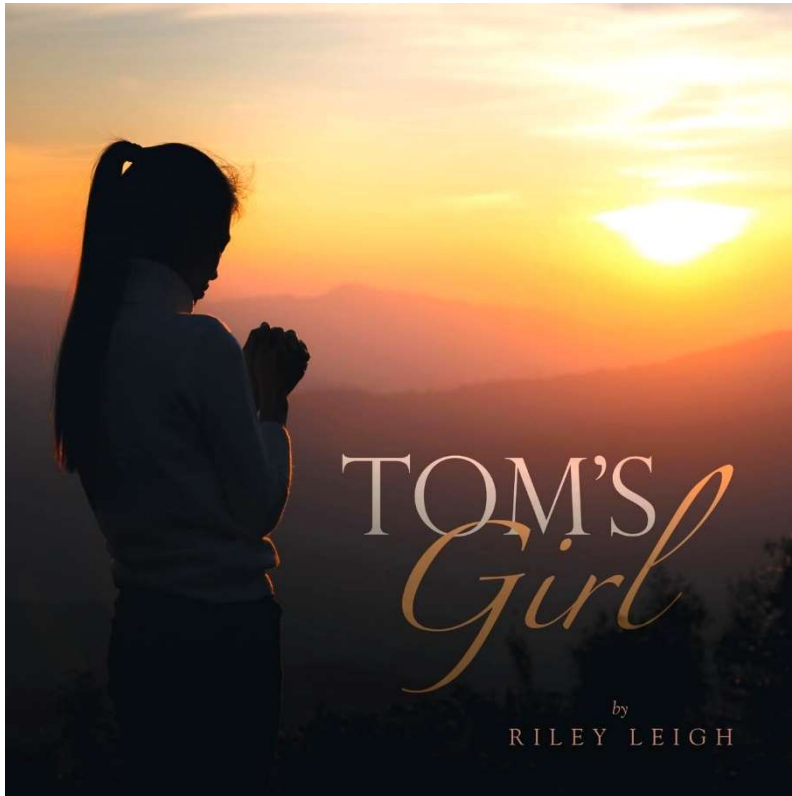


## ‘Tom’s Girl’ offers view on life lessons

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*“Tom’s Girl” by Riley Leigh. Bloomington, IN: Archway Publishing, 2025, 68 pages, \$18.99.*



“Did you ever wonder as a kid what you were going to be when you grew up?” Riley Leigh asks at the beginning of “Just What the Doctor Ordered,” the inaugural chapter of “Tom’s Girl,” a delightful collection of short stories that anyone of any age will appreciate and be able to relate to on multiple levels.

“Would you become a teacher, an astronaut, a lawyer, a doctor, or a farmer? This question was answered when I was about 10, or at least, I thought it had been.”

Leigh had me hooked literally from the very first page of her poignant, insightful, and occasionally profound take on a life well-lived and yet still in progress. The twelve episodes from various moments throughout her inevitable march to

adulthood capture the spirit and aura of what it was like growing up for many of us.

Sure, the details and particulars were different for all of us, but the spirit and emotion of the seemingly endless journey to find ourselves permeates every page.

Honestly, I found myself identifying with most of the stories so eloquently articulated by Leigh. At the onset of a few, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to relate the scenes she was describing to my own experience. But by about the fifth or sixth paragraph, I typically felt that eerie sense of déjà vu that often arises when we least expect it.

Consider the following passage from “Slip, Slide & Away,” the fifth chapter and one I found especially relatable:

“That day in town, Mom had given me and T.L. some spending money - \$2 apiece. She always let each of us pick out what we wanted, check it out by ourselves and show her our bargain when we got home. Of course, T.L., at age 6, usually bought some little baby dolls, but at 12, I had bigger plans.”

“I had every intention of buying something for myself and Mom, but \$2 only went so far. I searched the Dime Store aisles for any tag with the price of \$1-2 for me or Mom. Feeling guilty about how hard Mom had worked, I decided to put myself aside and spend the whole \$2 on her.”

Leigh retired after a 30-year career as a secondary and collegiate English and Communication instructor. Having fallen in love with creative writing at an early age, she continues to explore her passion – and this deceptively complex little book highlights her immense talent in a convincing yet innately modest manner.

As she explains in the introduction, “All of my relatives’ beliefs and views, values, and experiences are echoed within these stories and make up the very soul of my existence. These are my people, and these are my true stories, even if figments of my imagination.”

This description of “Tom’s Girl” captures the essence of Leigh’s literary prowess. By the time you finish chapter twelve, “The Gang,” you not only feel as if you know the author personally, you are almost convinced you grew up with her in an alternate but strangely familiar universe.

Seriously, see if you can remember your own version of the longing and dashed hopes Leigh describes in “Sweet Sixteen,” the ninth chapter.

“Two months before my sixteenth birthday and my driver’s license, I began hinting about a new black Datsun 280ZX I had seen for sale. It was a 1980 model, but in 1983, that was new! I related the most minute details to Dad – it’s pinstriping, the shiny chrome, the maroon interior, and most important, how many stations I could probably pick up on its radio. I also had to throw in that it was only a few days until my sweet sixteenth birthday.”

“‘Dad, can’t you just see me behind that wheel?’ I asked each day, passing by the car lot as he drove me to school. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’d guess you’d better learn how to drive a straight stick before we sign on the bank note’s dotted line, huh?’ It was bad enough being dropped off at the high school by your father in a green banged up, work truck, I thought. But, joking about my dream car I so desperately worshipped insulted me and my hopes of even getting a car – any car.”

If you want to see how this one plays out, you’ll need to pick up a copy of “Tom’s Girl” at your local bookstore – or maybe online. Spoiler Alert: If it doesn’t bring a tear to your eye, nothing will.

Liberally interspersed among the coming-of-age vignettes are some eternal truths only acquired through careful reflection on a well-lived life.

Case-in-point, ponder the inherent wisdom in the final paragraph from the last chapter:

“Moments as great as the ones we shared makes me realize that there are more important things in life than having money. In my heart, I know that if I was in need, each one would be there for me. Wealth comes from having friends like these, and these treasured memories become priceless.”

As Todd Johnston writes in his review on Amazon, “This is such a good book about life and lessons learned while growing up! The author is such a good writer making reading this book so enjoyable. Each chapter is a different story that we can all relate to in our own lives. I can’t wait for the next book from this author!”

Well said; I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.*