

She Was a Child

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There was a silence at the other end. The fuzzy static was only occasionally interrupted by her short, heavy breathing.

"Hey, are you still there...Hey!" There was an urgency in her voice. She sounded frightened and alone. He picked the receiver back up and cradled it against his ear. As he gathered himself to speak he could feel the tears swell up. Stay calm he told himself. You've got to keep your cool. That thought was quickly replaced by trying to remember where his gun was.

"Don't hang up on me...Answer me!" The fear in her voice was quickly turning to anger.

"I'm still here, sis." He took a deep breath. "Listen, where are you?"

"I'm at the bus station. Look, I had no place to go, I got all confused, and here I am. Please talk to me, I need you."

"Okay...All right, I'm on my way. Listen, do Mom and Dad know you came here?"

"They probably don't even know I'm gone..." The phone went dead. He panicked first, thinking he'd said the wrong thing. Then he remembered she was at a pay phone. She'd probably used up all the words her dime could buy. He hung up the phone and spastically began to look for his car keys. The news was just starting to sink into his head and everything got cluttered and disorganized. As he combed over the apartment in search of his keys, almost a million questions were being asked in his head. It would have been a million, but he suddenly remembered where his gun was. Why was this happening? When did it happen? Where were his car keys? How long has she known? Where could he hide the guy's body after he shot him? Where were those...There they are. He hurriedly grabbed his jacket and a smoke as he walked out the door with his newly recovered car keys.

As he drove his car out of the parking garage, the

questions stopped and the memories began. He was no longer driving down Hervey Street. He was running. Running through the rows of vegetables in the middle of their grandparent's garden. She was a child.

"Hey sis! Come here! I got to show you somethin'. It's a balloon plant!"

She was wearing a blue shirt with red sleeves and white ruffles. She had lost her pants somewhere among the cornstalks and had only a cloth diaper to cover her rear. Her ensemble was topped off with one of their grandmother's old Sunday hats that grandma used to wear to special occasions like funerals, weddings, and dinner on the grounds. As she came stumbling down the rows of green beans, mustard greens, and cucumber vines, you could see the excitement in her eyes.

"Show me Balloons! I want Balloons!" She looked like a midget scarecrow among the rows.

"See this plant here, sis. It grows balloons. Do you want one?" She was too young to understand deceit or the smirk on his face as he handed her the jalapeno.

"Go on, blow it up." That was the last thing he told her as she placed the pepper between her lips. As she ran back to the house crying and screaming, jalapeno smeared all over her face, it didn't seem quite as funny to him as when he'd planned it. And when his grandfather introduced him to the woodshed, it wasn't funny at all. Despite that and many other pranks he'd pulled on her, they had remained close.

He faded back into the present and was greeted by more questions. Why wasn't she more careful? She knew better. Didn't she? Where was she going to go? How many times could he shoot the guy without killing him instantly? He ran through the stop sign at Hervey and Katie Lane and turned onto East Seventeenth at the next stoplight. The bus station was only a few blocks away and hopefully so were the answers to his questions.

The last few blocks turned into miles and when he pulled into the bus station, he felt as if he'd just completed a trip across the country. He leaped out of his car and walked

very briskly into the station.

She was sitting beside the cigarette machine when he walked through the door. Her hair was much longer than when he last saw her and had some remnants of a perm. Her eyes, puffy and red, were tell-tale signs that she'd been nowhere near a bed recently. As he walked toward her he chuckled quietly to himself. At least she was wearing pants.

"Hey, you lookin' for a place to stay? I got rooms cheap." She looked up at her brother, startled by the proposition.

"Stan, you're such a jerk! Couldn't you just give your sis a simple hello?" She got up from her chair and enveloped him with a hug.

"It's good to see you. I've been alone for too long." There was longing in her voice. The desperation that was in her words earlier over the phone, sounded even stronger in person. Her voice, strangled by a combination of nicotine and coffee, signaled she wasn't the little girl in the garden anymore. She was a woman.

"Come on sis, you need to get some sleep. We'll talk later."

"All right, Stan...Oh, by the way, thanks for being here. I can always count on you."

Nothing more was said between the two. He unpacked her bag once they got back to the apartment. She stretched out on the couch and was falling asleep. As he sat down in the chair next to her, she smiled and whispered faintly, "You know I'm going to keep it, don't you?"

"Yeah, sis, I know."

She smiled again and slipped away quickly. As he looked at her resting there, he forgot the problems at hand. He began to slip back into memories of their childhood again.

When she awoke they'd face the current dilemma. But for now, he'd dream. She was a child....