

Remember This Face

Friday, 14 July 2006

Thirty-four years have passed but you can still recall her first day as the new girl at your small-town school. She is shy and amiable and eager to please your 4th grade geography teacher. You do what all followers your age do and wait for the cue from the popular kids before you get too friendly with her.

But they capriciously conspire to ostracize her; maybe it's because she wears glasses or because she's smart or her shoes are hand-me-downs or her dad's an alcoholic.

In time she's given a new name; a label that strips away her claim to self- or anyone else's respect and by virtue of relativity alone your stature among peers is elevated. Sure, you feel a little sorry for her but not sorry enough to sacrifice yourself.

Nobody ever sees her mom; 's husband beats her, 's 's doesn't get out of bed much, 's 's look at the way they dress! 's School kids echo parents' gossip and you listen passively, smiling at the appropriate moments, nodding in agreement while keeping your mouth shut and your hands to yourself.

Rumors spread and soon the new girl is everyone's joke. She averts her eyes and walks to class with her shoulder scraping against the wall as though if she presses hard enough it just might swallow her. She's scared but tries to be brave. She ignores the remarks, quietly washes the spittle out of her hair, and at night smothers her tears in the stale softness of a smoke stained pillow.

It's your birthday and your mom insists that you invite all the girls from your small class. You grudgingly offer the invitation and hope she'll decline. She accepts and your mom makes her feel welcome. Your mom has seen this girl before - even remembers her from her own school days. The girl has fun at the party and your friends force smiles and tolerate her for a time, but when the party's over and you're back in school the next day you push her aside like an old toy. You can't afford the liability and you teach her that trust is a liability she can't afford. You leave her stranded and alone and refuse to acknowledge your part in her pain. You're late for class, gotta run, have a good life.

Sweet 16 and you're picking out your first prom dress. It's going to be a girl's night and you all laugh when she's nominated for prom queen. She doesn't smile anymore. She doesn't raise her hand in class anymore. She doesn't even cry anymore.

Standing in the lunch line you notice some of the boys teasing her. In a way, you admire her strength. She's a rock, immovable. One of the boys is frustrated with her silence and aims his steel-toed boot at her

abdomen. When she refuses to flinch he accepts his own dare and kicks her with every ounce of strength in his all-star athlete leg. She falls to the floor, moaning and in the fetal position. You stand silent, immobile. Everyone is waiting for someone to make a move. Finally a teacher pushes his way through the crowd to help her to her feet and leads her to the nurse's office. She's still doubled over as the crowd merges back into its respectably neat lunch line. The boy laughs nervously and someone mutters 'jerk' while others pat his back. There's a lawsuit threatened, a settlement offered, daddy rakes in a windfall and the girl fades to a dim memory.

Years

pass and you finish college, get a job, and get married. You're in the Laundromat washing an oversized comforter when you see a face that looks vaguely familiar. Finally it comes back to you.

You tentatively walk over and tap her on the shoulder. 'Excuse me.'

She

spins around to face you. 'Yes? Do I know you?' She hasn't changed much; put on a little weight, maybe wearing a different hairstyle.

'You might not remember me. We went to school together.'

'Oh, yes, I think I remember you. You have brothers?'

'No, you're thinking of my cousin.'

'Oh. Now I remember.' She turns away for a moment to add a neatly folded towel to her basket, 'I don't think about that school much, but I do remember you were always nice to me.'

No, you weren't. You were a shadow accomplice but you're relieved she doesn't mention the birthday party.

'So,

what have you been doing with your life since you left school?' You're not sure if you really care to know, but you ask anyway.

'After I quit school, I moved to Alabama and got married, but that didn't last long so I'm back here living with my mom.'

You remember hearing that her dad passed away.

'Have any kids?'

'Oh, no. I can't have kids.'

You remember hearing a rumor that the kick left her barren.

"Well, I live just down the road a bit, would you like to come over for coffee?" This time you hope she'll accept; coffee's the least you can do.

"Sure, that would be nice."

You visit for awhile. You don't have much in common so the conversation is strained. Finally she's got to get back home. You say your good-byes.

"Let's do this again sometime!"

"Yes, let's." But you know you won't.

It's time for your 20 year class reunion. You've been living out of state but fly in to see all your old friends. It's good to see everyone again. You reminisce about the trouble you got into and recall your old teachers. You catch up on 20 years of living your lives to their fullest. You notice that the old cliques no longer hold; real life — it's the Great Equalizer.

"Remember that girl; the one everyone teased?" your friend asks.

"Yes, do you know what ever became of her?" another joins the conversation.

"I saw her 10 years ago, in the Laundromat. We had coffee together and she seemed to be doing okay. She can't have kids, though and she was living with her mom."

"Well, I saw her just the other day." Your friend continues. "She's living at the Simpson Hotel. She didn't know who I was. When I asked her about high-school she said she had no recollection of school but asked me if she was 'popular'."

"Really? What did you say?"

"I told her she was very popular."

You realize nobody's laughing anymore. The Simpson Hotel is a half-way home for the mentally ill and indigent. You lower your eyes, study the water ring stain under your glass and finally change the subject.

22
years after high-school graduation your mom calls to tell you - the boy with the steel-toed boots is killed in a car accident. Drunk. Slammed his pick-up into a tree. You only feel bad that you can't bring yourself to feel any remorse for him. It doesn't occur to you that 20 years might have softened his heart, too.

You're
in the park with your kids and a lady trips on a crack in the
sidewalk. Your kids start to laugh and you're far too stern when you
insist they be quiet. "Treat others the way you want to be treated"
you instruct. Your thoughts turn to the new girl in school from so
long ago and to the kids that destroyed her life. Kids like you.

Where
were all the parents, you wonder. Where were all the teachers? Surely
someone could have saved her. But the question comes back: where were
you?

You
have children of your own now but "the girl" is never far away. She's
the voice inside your head reminding you to be nice to the clerk.
She's every beggar on the street that accepts your dollar bills. She's
the underprivileged kids you mentor once a week. She's the meek that
you hope will inherit the earth. She's every good deed you do to make
up for being rotten, yet she's nowhere near to tell you it's okay,
you've done enough.

She's
nowhere near because 25 years into your wonderful life after
high-school, she has died alone, without pretension. And you; you're
haunted by the expectant face of the new girl at school and the
memories of how you helped to kill her.

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