

Untitled Short Story

Submitted for assessment as Genre Writing Assignment 3, 28-Aug-2020.

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Marcus Ashton pulled up on the side of the road in his beaten up Hyundai. The midday news bulletin cut mid-sentence, leaving only the pounding of rain on the windshield to break the silence. His was one of the few cars on the street at this hour.

Low chain-link fences separated many of the houses from the street, though one or two had neat hedges and white pickets. Across the way, a few houses down from his car, was a small block of brick units. They were chipped and worn in many places, and paint peeled from metal poles that supported an aged carport at the far end of the dusty gravel driveway. A lone car sat there; a metallic brown Kia.

As he reached for the car door, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, glanced at the ID—Patterson.

“Hey, boss.”

“Marcus, where are you?”

“Following up a lead for the Dwayne James case. I meant to tell you, but you were in a meeting.”

“You found the daughter? Why didn’t you take someone?”

“Maybe. It’s a bit of a long shot. I didn’t want to waste anyone’s time if I was wrong.”

“Keep me posted.” Senior Sergeant Patterson ended the call without waiting for a reply.

“Will do,” Marcus said to himself, slipping the phone back into his pocket and bracing for a dash through the rain.

Unit 5 was the last in the row and the furthest from the street. The collar of Marcus’s bomber jacket was turned slightly against the rain, and the small awning

offered little in the way of protection. Up close, the Kia was a few years old but well cared for. Next to the concrete steps leading to the door was a terracotta pot, home to a sickly fern. Besides the ankle-length grass strip along the fence, this was the only greenery on the block. Marcus knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

“My name is Detective Marcus Ashton. I’m with the police,” he said softly, intended only for the occupant of Unit 5. The door opened a few inches, security chain still in place. A young woman looked out, her eyes wide. Marcus held up his identification for her to see. “Can I come in please, Miss James? It’s a bit...”

She pushed the door closed enough to get the chain off with a small scrape and rattle before retreating into the unit and leaving Marcus to follow behind. “Wait there,” she said.

The room—a loungeroom with a small kitchen area separated by a laminate bench—was tidy, if sparse. The television was new. A threadbare couch sat near the roaring gas heater, an elderly affair. On the floor in front of that was a book—a biology textbook with a pencil and notebook haphazardly sticking out—and what may have been a new Macbook. The kitchen was clean. There were no dishes to be seen, neither clean nor dirty.

The young woman returned and tossed Marcus a towel, new and fluffy. He caught it with surprise.

“Oh. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“You can stand there if you want.” She pointed to the heater while settling herself at the far end of the couch, pushing the laptop closed as she did so. She pulled her legs up and hugged her knees tightly to her chest.

Marcus moved in front of the heater. He ran the towel over his hair, combing it out again with his fingers.

“We’ve been looking for you for a while now, Miss James.”

“Claudia is... is fine.” She ran a hand over her forehead and down the side of her face. “Is Dwayne out? Does he know where I am?”

He shook his head. "No, he's still in custody, and given the trouble we had locating you, I think you're safe enough for the time being. I just want to ask you a few questions about the night you disappeared," he said. "You're a seventeen-year-old girl who's been missing for three months. We've been concerned."

She shrugged, not meeting his eyes, though her shoulders relaxed, just a little.

"Jude was especially worried," he said. "Your social worker."

Claudia frowned and stiffened, hugging her knees tighter. "Jude can fuck off."

Marcus watched quietly.

"They left me with him for years," she continued after a pause. "Why would I trust them now?"

The Cartoon Network is on, but the sound on the television is down so low that the girl can barely hear it. She slides forward, off the dirty threadbare couch and onto the floor to kneel before the huge flat screen. The colours are reflected in her bright eyes.

She doesn't know where the television came from. It just showed up a few days earlier. She pretends it is a thirteenth birthday present, but knows that it isn't. Dwayne barely remembers weekdays, let alone special days like a birthday, and he'd never buy her something like that even if he did. It stands out against the bare nicotine-stained walls like a black bruise, and is easily the most expensive thing in the whole house.

There is a creak from the hall, and she freezes. Her eyes flit to the pile of empty cans next to the recliner.

Dwyane stumbles in, beer in hand. The digital time in the corner of the screen says it is barely nine o'clock. He stinks of stale alcohol and cigarettes and rancid sweat. She tries to smile at him. He just looks at her with red, watery eyes.

"Can I go to Laura's today?" she asks, struggling to keep her voice light and casual. She needs to be out of the house when he's like this.

She regrets the question before she's finished asking it. His face contorts into the twisted grimace of an angry drunk.

“No,” he grunts, chugging the last of the beer and throwing the thankfully empty can at her and missing.

“Clean that fucking shit up,” he says, nodding at the pile beside the recliner. She is thankful that is all he says.

“They should have moved me when Mum died,” Claudia paused. “‘Better to stay with family,’ they said.”

“Dwayne is a piece of work, that’s true.”

“He hates me and I hate him, but there was nowhere else to go.” Her eyes angrily flick to Marcus. “When I finally ran away, he found me and beat the shit out of me.” She paused, picked at her fingernails. “I never tried again. Until now.”

“Because you had a chance?”

“Because I had a chance. I didn’t even think about it. I just did it,” she said. “How did you find me?”

“Did you work at the Queen’s Arms about a month ago?”

“Maybe.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “One of the bar staff—I forget his name, it’s in the file—was going to make a complaint about a girl that matched your description.”

Claudia met his eyes and looked away.

“Seems his nose got broken after he touched a waitress. He withdrew his complaint when the owner found out she was seventeen.”

For a moment, she shrunk into herself, and then she straightened. Fierce.

“Will seemed alright, but he turned out to be an arsehole,” she sighed. “He only slapped my bum, but I’d already said no twice, and it just... reminded me of Dwayne. So I punched him.”

Marcus waited for more. “Did Dwayne touch you?”

“Sometimes, but not... like that. I was always kinda scared one day he might though.” She kept her eyes on the floor, her long fingers picking at the threads on the couch. “The way he looked sometimes. When he’d been drinking.”

“Tell me about working for him.”

Dwayne and Claudia creep through an empty lot in an industrial district. It is midnight and overcast; the only light comes from a weak streetlamp.

They crouch near the cyclone fencing. “You’ll be fine. Don’t fuck up,” he says, taking a large set of bolt cutters from his backpack. Claudia is scared, but knows better than to say so. She’s always scared when Dwayne takes her on a job. She rubs her hands together as though she were cold, covering the tremor of fear.

Dwayne snips the wire and pulls a section up for Claudia to crawl under before following behind.

“This job is the one,” he says. He always says that, and he is always wrong. He points to a slim window on the warehouse before them. Too small for him, but perfect for the athletic young woman. “Up there. Unlock the door. In and out in five minutes,” he says, as though they hadn’t done this ten times before.

He cups his hands together, and she steps onto them for a boost to the window. It opens easily, and she scrambles up to the ledge. Dwayne reaches up, half pushing, half slapping her behind.

“Don’t fuck up.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said. “Why would he take a kid with him?”

“You know what he was into though?”

Claudia shrugged. “Yeah. He’d been charged a few times. He had a shit job and still seemed to have money to waste on beer and poker. I had to start sneaking notes out of his wallet when he was pissed, so there’d be money for food.” She kept her eyes on the carpet. “I knew he stole stuff. I heard him on the phone sometimes.”

“And you didn’t come forward?”

“How could I? I was scared shitless of him.” She sighed angrily. “He’d get charged and get off. Nothing would stick, and if he found out I’d said anything he’d kill me.”

“Not this time, though.”

“Nah,” she shook her head. “Not this time.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes slightly. “What happened to the money?”

“I spent it on food.”

“No, from the last job.” Marcus shook his head and shrugged. “We know he got away with about fifty grand. Do you know where it went?”

Claudia shifted uncomfortably. “Like he’d tell me.”

“He says you were in on it.”

Claudia didn’t reply.

“Admittedly,” Marcus said, “Dwayne only tried to implicate you once he realised you were missing.”

“Do you want me to come inside with you?” Jude asks.

Claudia shakes her head. “No, thanks.” She stares at her hands. “I’ll try to be quick.”

“Okay. Just a bag and a change of clothes. We can always come back tomorrow.”

Claudia nods and slips out of the car and into the chilly night air. She walks around the side of the house she shares with Dwayne and up the steps of the back porch. She pulls the spare key from under a pot plant.

Inside, she picks up her backpack and starts to fill it with clothes.

She stops. Realisation dawns on her.

Dwayne was in jail. Her own cage was finally open.

She would not be going with Jude to some halfway house or foster home. Fuck that.

Claudia moves to Dwayne's room, collects his duffel bag from the wardrobe, and returns to her own room. She moves her few clothes to the larger bag, and changes into jeans and a black hoodie. She glances around. There is nothing else here she wants.

In the backyard, Claudia locks the door and replaces the key. In the garden shed, next to a broken lawnmower and some empty plastic pots, is a crate that contains more money than she had ever seen. It barely all fits in the duffel.

She throws the bag over the back fence, figuring she has another five or ten minutes before Jude realises anything might be wrong.

It is nearly midnight, but there will be a train going somewhere, she is sure of it.

"I still have the ticket in my wallet. It was my ticket to freedom." Claudia wiped a tear from her cheek, her eyes doing their best to be furious rather than sad.

Marcus nodded at the textbook on the floor. "It looks like you're making some changes."

"Yeah. I want to be a vet. Applied to a bridging course the day before cut off."

"You like animals then?"

"They're better than people, usually."

Marcus nodded with a chuckle. "Usually." He waited until she met his gaze, then glanced from the Macbook to the television and back to Claudia. "You really don't know what happened to the money?"

She shook her head; a short, sharp movement. "Not the fifty you think he had. I had a little stashed for a rainy day. That was a present to myself," she nodded at the laptop, "but besides that I've been tight. I have to be."

Marcus watched her for a moment before nodding.

"What about when he gets out?" she asked. "What should I do?"

“I think you’ve got a year before you need to worry about that. But...” he scratched his head, “maybe move further away, if you can. You’ve already made a good break, but that would be better.”

“I thought about changing my name as well.”

“To?”

“Gibson. It’s Nana’s.”

“Claudia Gibson sure sounds like a vet,” he said. Silence settled between them for a few moments, the roar of the heater a companionable murmur.

“So, what now then?” she said.

Marcus shrugged. “Nothing. Without the money there’s no evidence, and it’s a crook’s word against yours. I might need a statement, but otherwise it’s not illegal to be missing. Human Services will want to be sure you’ve got access to the right support, but it sounds like you landed on your feet. I’ll try to square them away.” He pulled a card out of his wallet and handed it to her. “You’re better off far away from him, and I see you know that. Just call me if you need anything.”

Her shoulders sagged, and a smile touched her lips. Claudia opened the door for Marcus.

Outside, the rain had stopped.