

## Quiet

The first time I see the little girl she is sitting on the porch with her grandmother. Little bit of a thing. The kid, not the grandmother. Grandma is a human battleax with eyes like windows in a burning house. The kid sits, prim and proper, on an aluminum lawn chair. You look at her from the feet up, those tiny white shoes with the little bitty buckles at the ankle, then the wrinkled shorts and the frilly top, and you think, "Cute kid." That scraggly hair falling into her eyes makes her look sweet. But then you get to her eyes, the gray eyes that stare right into you, as if they can see inside your soul, see what you're thinking. That can scare a person. She sits there with that same prim mouth as her grandmother's, just waiting to tell me what's what. It isn't fair, I think, that to be with Marnie I get this bundle to boot.

Marnie and I walk up the steps to her mother's house. I put out my hand to the old woman and say, "Hello," but what I'm thinking is, what the hell did I do to deserve this?

The grandmother, she looks at my hand like it's dogshit and just nods.

Marnie is no help at all. Half the time she acts like she's in another world, and this time I wish I was in that world with her. I look at her and she just raises that cigarette up to her mouth as if it's the most important thing in the world and looks the other way. The grandmother has the kid's clothes all packed in a little suitcase, blue with a ballerina on it. This kid doesn't look like any ballerina.

“This is just for the weekend,” Grandma says. “I raised her since she was a baby. There’s no way I’m going to just let her go off with ...with...someone I don’t know.” She doesn’t need to say, “with the likes of you.” I get the idea.

“You can keep her,” I want to say, but I don’t. I know that it wouldn’t be wise for a number of reasons. Mainly, I’d be looking at the backside of Marnie’s ass as she says goodbye. It seems like the kid is all she ever talks about anymore.

The kid says to Marnie, “If you marry him, will he be my father then?” She looks at me as if she is about to throw up.

“I’d like to be,” I say in my most pleasant voice, but when the words fall on the crowd I know I’m not fooling anyone.

“Well, we’ll see,” the grandmother says. “I’ll call on Sunday to make sure everything’s okay. To see if she wants to stay or not. That ought to give her time.”

They say if you want to see what a woman’s going to be like in thirty years, just take a look at her old lady. I was looking, and it wasn’t good. Marnie must take after her father. There is no resemblance between the two of them. Marnie with her long beautiful legs that go all the way up, creamy skin, a face like a young Lauren Bacall’s. The grandmother, a worn-out old hen with a face like Popeye’s. The kid doesn’t really look like either of them. Who does she look like, I wonder. No one I’ve ever seen Marnie with.

I pick up the little suitcase and say, “We’ll take good care of her,” as pleasant as pie. The grandmother gives me this level look and says, “See that you do.”

The kid doesn't say much. The way she's acting. I figure she'll be quiet for a while. On the way out to the farm, driving on the highway, I think, "It's so quiet right now I'd better enjoy it." You know how kids are.

Marnie keeps turning around to the back seat to look at the kid. She has a look on her face like she's coming up with an invention that will make us rich.

"Anybody hungry?" I say, looking at the kid in the rearview mirror. I thought the mention of food would cheer her up, but she looks at me as if I've just offered her a worm.

We stop at the A&W drive-in restaurant where Marnie and the kid inform me that *they'll* be getting a foot-long to share. I order myself a couple of hamburgers with the works and, of course, root beer for everyone. I figure what kid can resist root beer, right? But when the drinks come, she hands hers back to me and says, "I can't drink this. My grandma says only a fool puts ice in root beer. Make sure they serve it cold with no ice." I get everything straightened out and when I hand her the food she delivers a "Thank you," as if she's thinking, "Go rot in hell."

I figure it's going to be the longest weekend of my life. Then I realize it's nothing compared to what's going to come when the kid's living in our house for good.

She starts talking, but I wish she wouldn't it's all what Grandma would do and what she wouldn't. Her old Grandma wouldn't drive a car on the highway at night, especially with only one headlight. In fact, Grandma doesn't drive a car at all. The kid makes driving sound like a thing of suspicion, at which point I breathe a big sigh of relief because that means Grandma won't be coming out to visit unless she wants to spring for a hundred-dollar cab ride out to the country.

I say to the kid, "Imagine, if you come live with us for good, like your mother wants...when you're sixteen we'll buy you a little car. A car just right for a girl. One of those compacts. I bet I could get something for a few thousand bucks for you and fix it up like new."

*This* interests her. She chews thoughtfully, both hands around her hog dog. Maybe she's thinking I'm not so bad after all, which is probably a dangerous thought to a kid who's used to being with an old Grandma, a mother who comes to visit, and no dad, no man, anywhere in sight. I have the feeling she is torn between saving up this news to spring on her Grandma when she returns and talking more about the kind of car we'll get for her.

"Don't tell Grandmother that," Marnie says. Marnie never learned to drive either. The battleax probably thought if Marnie could drive she'd drive away from her as fast as she could.

"We have a dog you can play with," I say. I feel proud. I paid a lot for Molly at a dog show. She only had one thing wrong with her, and I can't for the life of me remember what it is right now. But that's why I got her cheaper than full price.

She stops chewing. The hot dog hits the floor.

"A dog?" she says.

I start telling her all about Molly when she says, "I'm *allergic* to dogs. Grandma says I can't ever have a dog."

"Oh. Well," I start to say but she goes on, gathering steam.

"I get real sick. I can't breathe. My throat swells up." She looks at Marnie like she already has something stuck in her throat.

Marnie has this stricken look on her face. “I forgot,” she says in a small voice. She forgot.

“It’s an outdoor dog,” I say, quickly. “She stays outside all the time.”

“That’s right,” Marnie chimes in. “We hardly ever let her in the house. Unless it’s raining.”

I shoot her a look to be quiet. When will she ever learn to be quiet when she needs to?

“Your mom’s right,” I say. “The dog’s hardly ever in the house. She has her own doghouse. I built it myself. I could build you a little playhouse or a dollhouse, too. If you like. I could do that for you.”

“My grandmother’s going to be real mad,” she says.

“Oh, no,” I say. “She won’t. You’ll see.”

“So you can’t even pet a dog, right?” Marnie says.

And the kid yells, “No!” from the back seat loud enough to break my eardrums. I decide to get going back to the house. Good thing I have steady hands when I drive.

When we get to the house, I don’t see Molly on the front porch or in her doghouse. I figure she must be near the stream, looking for rabbits.

We all get out of the car, Marnie and me, laughing and joking, to cheer the kid up. I hear the rustling of leaves. Then Molly, blasted Molly, comes out of nowhere, headed in our direction. I look at the kid who looks excited at first—good excited, because what

kid, after all, can resist a dog. I say, “Stay, Molly!” and I try to get between Molly and the kid because the kid’s not used to dogs. But somehow I’m not moving fast enough, and Molly gets to the kid before me and, boom, knocks the kid down to the ground. Molly rifles the kid’s clothes until she comes up, triumphantly, with a bit of hot dog.

The kid doesn’t say anything until she sees her own blood, and then it’s hysteria. I try to pull Molly off, but she think I’m wrestling with her, and she jumps sideways with a crazy grin on her face. I pick up the girl—Lily—and run to the house while she screams, “Don’t touch me! I don’t want you to touch me! I want my grandmother. You get your hands off me!”

Marnie’s done for. I’m the one who cleans up Lily. The whole while, Marnie is saying, “Mother’s going to be so mad.”

Even to me, it looks bad. Lily’s not bitten, but she’s got scratches on her hands, top and bottom, where she fell. And the worst, a jagged cut down the side of her face as if a wicked witch traced a finger in her skin. It’s not too wide, but there’s blood.

We take her to the Emergency where I’m silently convinced I’ll be in jail by the end of the night. A woman hands me the paperwork and says, “What’s your daughter’s name?” I say, “Lily.” That’s the first time I’ve said her name. I think back over what happened and realize that her face must have scraped against that tiny piece I’ve been meaning to sand on the car door, and I damn myself for that. I think of all the things I did instead of sanding that door.

As the female doctor is stitching, the kid tells her, "I'm allergic to dogs. The dog tried to eat me." After the doctor's done, she pulls Marnie and me out into the hallway. I can't help myself. I tell her everything about working on the car, how I didn't sand it when I should have.

"That's where she scraped her face," I say, ready to accept my punishment. To my surprise, that doctor touches my shoulder and says, "Parents are always hardest on themselves when an accident happens." Suddenly my heart is too big for my chest.

She says, "You know the child's allergic to dogs, and you still have a dog?" She shakes her head like she's seen it all. There's no using explaining it. It would only make matters worse.

I say, "I'll take care of it."

I think she's going to be nice again but she says, "See that you do," just like Grandma did.

I carry Lily into the house. She's dazed now from the medicine, half asleep on her way to whole. It's weird to see those tiny perfect stitches running down the side of her once-perfect face. I can't stand to look, it makes me feel bad. Marnie sits on the living room rocker, and I put Lily in her arms. I take one more look at those stitches running down her face and keep going over the doctor's words, that it probably won't scar, as if it's a prayer. I go out to the front porch. When we came home from the hospital, Molly wouldn't come to me and she wouldn't run away. Now she sits a few feet away from the house, as if she knows she's done something bad. I throw rocks from the front porch to

keep her away from the house. She moves quickly from side to side, happy with whatever game I'm willing to play.

When I go back to the living room I see that Marnie has taken her blouse off. She's holding one of her creamy white breasts to her daughter's still mouth. She brushes it across her daughter's lips as if coaxing her to eat. I think, the child's too old for that. I feel like I'm in a dream. Marnie looks up at me; her face is wet with tears. I know I'm interrupting. I wish I'd never seen this.

"She's such a delicate little thing," Marnie says. "If I had only nursed her when I wanted...but no, Mother took her right out of my arms when I tried. 'You don't know what you're doing,' she said. 'You'll drop her.' It made me feel so bad. She was always saying things like that. She wouldn't even let me hold her. I could have taken care of her. I should have tried harder."

I feel the bottom drop out of my life, like a road disappearing.

I don't remember crossing the room. All of a sudden I'm with her and her sleeping child. Holding them both while Marnie cries, clutching the top of her blouse around her throat. We are all together in my house, now. My wife, her daughter. I've made the decision to do this, and I'm surprised how much it matters to me and not just for Marnie's sake.

I go to the phone and spend half the night calling my sister, my friends, every person I know. The shelter is closed until Monday. Nobody will take this dog.

If you're going to do a thing, I think, you need to do it right. So that's what I try to do.



I go out to the yard to look for Molly. She jumps for joy to see me, then sits down, tail thumping, whimpering. Of all the living things in my life, she is always the happiest to see me. I walk to her doghouse and kneel down. She follows me. She nuzzles her snout under my arm, trying to force me to pet her. I put my arms around her neck, sink my fingers into her long fur. I remove her tags and her collar.

I walk to the car and get in, then crack open the passenger side door. She leaps in beside me.

I drive and drive until we hit the exit for a northern highway, a stretch of road I've barely driven on. I keep thinking, she can't come back. While the afternoon light is still good, I pull over to the side of the highway and let her out. I sit with her awhile and watch the traffic. It's not too busy now, but someone is bound to pick her up.

I say, "Stay, Molly! Stay!" No hot dog or other meat in sight, she obeys me. She sits down and licks my hand. I start to walk away. I hear her whimper. I turn around and yell, "Stay!" as she starts to stand up. She sits down again and looks straight ahead.

I drive to the next exit and turn around. I stay in the far left lane so she won't see me and run across the highway. She looks like a soldier at her post. I pass once, twice, and still she doesn't see me. I try to gauge the reactions of the other drivers. I see cars with children in them, watch the children point at the dog sitting at the side of the road. Occasionally, a car slows down and Molly looks at it, expectant. Almost an hour passes. I want to wait somewhere, unseen, until a driver slows down, opens the door, and lets her in. But I can't. I need so much to get home to my family.

