

The Long Way Home

Small Change had always had a hard time with authority, which in the past had led to him being dishonorably discharged from the army and presently had him handcuffed in the back of a police cruiser. He had his head leaned back and his eyes closed while the officer took a statement from the one conscious “victim.” Small Change wasn’t worried about what the guy was saying; he knew the other witnesses in KT’s would be in his favor. Those three guys had been asking for it. Besides, his guardian angel at the station would be able to sweep a little bar fight under the rug and have him out in no time. Lickety-split.

Officer Donaldson got in the cruiser and visibly shivered against the January cold. Winters in Alabama generally don’t get bad until around January. This one was going to be a doozy too. The temperature was hovering around the 30 degree mark, and the wind chill was making it feel about ten degrees lower. Donaldson’s nose was already running, had been for a few days, and he had to fight his teeth from chattering. This wasn’t his first run-in with Small Change, and he knew it wouldn’t be his last. The infuriating part was nothing ever stuck to the runt. It was like the guy was made of Teflon.

“That’s what your problem is,” Donaldson said out loud as if he and Small Change had been having a conversation the whole time. “You never learn a lesson. Keep getting off with a damn slap on the wrist.”

Small Change, by now dozing, snorted a tiny snore. He could hear a voice, but he had no idea who it belonged to or what was being said. It was like listening to Charlie Brown’s teacher. That made him laugh, just a little.

“Think that’s funny, do ya?” Donaldson asked the guy in his rearview. “Maybe I should teach you a lesson. Since the department doesn’t think it’s necessary. Just drive up the road to the JayCee building and knock some sense and respect into you.”

Small Change was in that fuzzy zone between sleep and being awake. The place where states of consciousness bleed into each other. The teacher, he couldn’t remember if she had a name, was lecturing again. This time he was actually in the animated classroom, filled with the lovable cast of Peanuts. Only instead of Charlie Brown it was him. And why not? It was his dream, and his name was Charlie too. Seeing himself in that yellow shirt with the black zigzag made him laugh again.

“Alright smartass,” Donaldson said. “Let’s take a quick detour.” He put the car in drive and headed in the opposite direction of the police station.

The JayCee building was a dilapidated house that was used only for the annual haunted house. The wood had long since begun to take on a gray hue. The shutters, not repaired to add to the effect, were left cracked, broken and barely holding on. If the place was a person it would definitely be the sick black sheep of the family, any family. Even the Manson family.

Donaldson pulled into the drive and continued toward the back of the house. He came here from time to time and snuck in a nap. It helped pass the hours on those slow nights. That’s how he knew about the privacy of the area. Only on the rarest of occasions would he find anyone around. Usually some idiotic drug deal or a couple trying to sneak a quickie. He always busted them. It helped make him look good for the powers that be at the department, and he had zero tolerance for law breakers. No matter how trivial the infraction.

The cruiser bouncing through the rutty ground shook Small Change awake. It took a moment for the cobwebs of sleep to come loose, but when they did he recognized the area. He had brought Francesca here last Halloween. She loved that scary crap. He also knew what being here instead of the police station meant. *This cop thinks he's a fucking superhero, cleaning up the streets one punch at a time.* The car came to a quick stop, and the cop was out the door almost before the brakes took effect.

“Get out, you piece of shit,” Donaldson said as he yanked Small Change from the backseat. “Time for your medicine.”

The first punch came as soon as Small Change made contact with the rear quarter panel. It was a mediocre blow to his midsection. The cop grabbed his shoulder for leverage and gave three more punches to the same area. All of them rights. Small Change sucked in air and snuck a glance at the cop. He was on the verge of panting. *Obviously not a fighter.* Small Change knew if he stayed bent over, pretending to be wounded, this little detour would be over soon, and he'd be at the station shortly. He leaned back anyway and flashed a grin. He just couldn't help himself.

“Really?” Donaldson asked. He withdrew his nightstick and gave it a flourishing spin. “Round two dickhead.”

The butt end jabbed into Small Change's stomach. The air rushed from his body like an explosion. He dropped to his knees. He knew tomorrow, a couple of tomorrows to be more precise, his abdomen would be bruised and sore. The next shot was a swing to his ribs. He let out a scream he was sure muffled the sound of a bone breaking. *That's the only one you get, so*

enjoy it. I won't give you the satisfaction of hearing me make another sound. And he gritted his teeth to keep the pain in when the cop gave him a kick to the broken rib.

“Next...time,” Donaldson said, each word coming on a puff of breathe. “You get ready to smart off or make trouble remember this little lesson I taught you. Courtesy of Professor Donaldson.”

Got ya, shithead. It'll be easier to find you with a name. I'll catch ya with ya pants down someday soon.

“Now let's get your sorry ass to jail,” Donaldson said as he yanked Small Change up and tossed him back into the cruiser.

“Mr. Hill,” Sergeant Gleeson said as he unlocked the cell door and slit it open. “Haven't seen you in a while. Please join me for a stroll, won't you.”

Small Change eased off the cot with a whence. He stepped through the opening and took a single step to the left. Then he waited. Gleeson slid the door shut and locked it back. He then put his hand on Small Change's elbow with just the slightest of pressure, knowing how overexcited some guests, that's how he referred to all the inmates, could be when touched.

Gleeson jingled with each step, keys rattling against his legs. It reminded Small Change of his childhood, and how he came to be known not as Charlie Hill but rather Small Change. He collected the coins his father and grandfather liked to reward him with, always seeing the bigger picture (movie and popcorn) instead of the gum or candy bar they originally intended him to purchase. It would take time to save for his prize; therefore, for about a month at a time he

jingled everywhere he went. Most people in school or the neighborhood knew what the cause of the cacophony that surrounded Charlie was and quickly christened him with his colorful, more appropriate moniker. The label stuck, even after he quit carrying pockets of coins. Most of his present associates adapted it due to his ever present low rank in the local organized crime outfit.

“The key to peace and happiness is the ability to enjoy and accept you current position,” he liked to tell people when they joked about his status as errand boy. *I’m just biding my time until the big picture comes into focus.*

They came to a halt outside an interrogation room. Gleeson didn’t have to tell or put hands on Small Change to guide him. It was instinctual by this point. He stood with his back to the wall while Gleeson unlocked the room.

“Please enjoy your stay, Mr. Hill,” he said as he held the door open. “I’d ask if I can get you anything, but I have a feeling you won’t be here that long.”

Small Change gave the older man a nod and a smile as he stepped into the room. Gleeson waited until he sat at the table before closing and locking the door. Small Change had always liked Gleeson, from the first time they met. Gleeson had always been polite and treated him like a person. It helped that he looked like a surrogate grandfather for the universe. Most people, especially cops, treated Small Change like a rabid animal. He *was* a thug for hire, but he still tried to treat people with care and kindness when he could. Which could be a challenge when having to beat people for money. He heard keys enter the door and knew the only other cop he’d ever gotten along with was about to come inside.

Detective Barnes entered with a big grin, pearly whites almost sparkling in the bright lights. He saw the guy often, at least once every two weeks, but he never got used to how good

looking Barnes was. Small Change wasn't attracted to men; however, he could acknowledge a well put together man when he saw one. And Barnes fit the bill. He was a jock in high school, and if Small Change remembered correctly had even played a little ball (football and baseball) in college. Judging by his current build he had stayed in shape for the ten years that had passed since those playing days.

"There are easier ways for us to talk," Barnes said as he sat opposite Small Change. "A telephone for starters. Don't you have a burner?"

"Yea," Small Change said. "But I'm out of minutes. Besides, this way is more personal.

Barnes let out a hearty chuckle and leaned back with his arms across his chest. Small Change thought the guy looked like someone from TV. Or in the movies. Probably could with his head full of dark hair and charming way of talking.

"So what's the story?" Barnes asked.

"Volf is about to open another meth lab."

"We just busted one."

"Can't keep a good man down."

"Volf definitely isn't a good man."

"Good at what he does," Small Change said. "Mind if I have a smoke?"

"I quit," Barnes said. His expression had slipped into deep concentration and the slightest hint of anger.

Small Change would bet money the guy had swapped to the electronic cigarettes. The things were everywhere. People had dove head first in the health craze. Everyone wanted to be immortal.

“So that will make seven labs up and running in the area again,” Barnes said.

“Yea. Plus the prostitution. And the gambling. And the extortion. And blackmail.”

“One problem at a time, Change. Got an address? For the new place.”

“Nothing concrete yet. Word around the campfire is it’s gonna be in La Vista trailer park. Which is an ideal location.”

“And why is that?”

“Too obvious,” Small Change said. “Hide in plain sight.”

“Makes sense. Got anything else?”

“Not really. Kind of a wasted trip, I know, but I also knew you’d want to hear about the lab ASAP.”

“Definitely,” Barnes said. “Good news is no one is pressing charges over the fight at the bar, so this will be easier to sweep under the rug.”

“Good news for you.”

“And you. Paper work makes me ill. When I get ill I tend to take it out on my friends. So less paper work means a smoother time for you.”

“Good news for me,” Small Change said. “Lucky I can count you as a friend.”

“Yeap. Now get out of here and keep your eyes and ears open.”

Small Change stared at the detective for a few seconds. Then put one hand, palm up, on the interrogation table.

“Oh yea,” Barnes said. “Fifty bucks right?”

Small Change gave a brief nod and smiled.

Small Change sat on a bench outside the police station. He held a cigarette in his mouth, a roll of electrical tape in one hand and a roll of quarters in the other. The cops, probably Donaldson and his buddies, had busted up the quarters from the paper sleeve while he was in a cell. Just trying to be funny assholes and cause him more problems. He was used to that kind of stuff. Patiently he placed the quarters back in the ripped wrapper and slowly wound the tape around. It was a tedious process, but it gave him time to have a cigarette or two. Not to mention pester the cops, who hated seeing a recently release inmate linger outside the door. After three cigarettes he was finally ready to go home.

He walked the block and a half back to his car parked outside KT's. The night was still fairly young, closing in on one, so there were still patrons inside. For a brief moment he considered going back in and ordering a beer. Just to see the slow wave of recognition was over the bartender's face. He decided to forget it and head back to Francesca. She was probably wondering where he had been for so long. He had promised to be back hours ago. He'd have to give her a great smile and explain how he took the long way home. Hopefully that would pacify her. If she found out about the fight and going to jail she'd have a fit. Which was going to make

keeping the broken rib a secret a challenge. He'd have to come up with some believable story pass off.

He was too distracted with developing a cover story for his rib (the best he'd come up with was he was going to buy Franny some flowers from the old lady who travels from bar to bar when the money got caught in the wind and as he chased it down he tripped and landed on some discarded construction equipment) to notice the car following him. When he finally did notice the headlights he was pulling into a space in the apartment complex parking lot. Those two bright, saucer eyes shined in his rearview and caused him to pause. He sat, considering his options. He could just leave, but chances were whoever was behind him knew he lived there and would just go inside and wait for him to return. Which would mean putting Franny in danger. He could break into another apartment, hoping they got confused and followed him, and try to give them the slip. But that was a big risk. Maybe he could get to the apartment (and Franny) and put up a stand inside. Or he could just walk straight back to them now and handle things as far from Franny as possible. He stepped from the car and headed toward the lights.

Three steps past his car he saw three doors open on the other car. The lights shined in his eyes, making the guys exiting the car faceless shapes. He slipped his right hand into his pocket and used the left to shield his eyes, all while standing with his left shoulder facing the car load of looming danger.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” he asked.

The shapes said nothing and moved forward. Small Change knew a fight was coming, and he was ready for it. The closer the shapes got the more he could make out. There were no

visible weapons; these guys weren't there for death. They were big fellas, but that didn't shake Small Change.

The first guy swung, a big right-handed loop a blind man would have seen coming. Small Change easily sidestepped and delivered a crushing right of his own to the guy's guts. The roll of quarters in Small Change's fist knocked the air and resolve out of the guy. He collapsed on the pavement. The other two guys hesitated when they saw their buddy drop. Small Change took advantage. He quickly closed the five foot gap and landed a rabbit punch to the first guy's ribs. The snap of a rib quickly vanished beneath the guy's scream. Just for good measure Small Change gave the guy a swift kick to the hand attempting to shield his newly broken bone.

The last guy didn't hesitate when his second friend went down. He managed to get a heavy blow to Small Change's damaged ribs. That pain that went with the blow made Small Change want to vomit. He bit into his lower lip, springing free blood, to keep his own screams from escaping. While lost in pain the guy connected a second punch to Small Change's head. It sent him crashing down.

Darkness wanted to swallow Small Change. He fought the urge to sleep and made his eyes stay opened. His assailant figured the coast was clear to check on his comrades and had turned his attention away from Small Change. He could make out the big mountain of a man leaning over his buddy with the broken rib, but it was like watching the scene play out in slow motion, in the fog. He squeezed his eyes shut and summoned every bit of clarity he could muster. When the guy returned to finish what he started Small Change wanted to be ready. He looked at the guys again, and this time things were clearer. The broken guy was squirming in

pain as his buddy tried to relax him. *We're like twins, only I don't have someone to lick my wounds.* He tightened his grip on the quarters and waited.

The mountain slowly rose and turned back to Small Change. Anger seemed to radiate from him. With slow twists, he managed to pop the vertebrae in his neck. He spoke as he stepped toward Small Change.

“This was supposed to be a warning. For you to keep your mouth shut to the cops. But now I'm just gonna beat you for enjoyment. For hurting my friends.”

He bent down to grab Small Change's worn black pea coat, and when he did Small Change attacked. The movement came like a snake strike. Small Change put so much effort into the punch that connected with the mountain's shin (*gotta chop redwood's down at the roots*) that the tibia snapped. The mountain let out a bloodcurdling scream and collapsed. He continued to scream as Small Change got to his feet. He stood over the guy and grabbed his collar to get his attention.

“Don't ever come to my home again,” he said. Then he punched the guy's jaw, breaking it, to stop him from making so much noise.

The hundred foot walk to the apartment felt like climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. Small Changed lumbered, hurting with every step. He kept biting his lip, sending blood flowing down his chin. As soon as he got to the door he knew something was wrong.

Inside looked like a bomb had gone off. Everything he owned was in shambles. The television set shattered. Couch cushions ripped. Feathers strung about like snow. Pieces of dishes lay about.

How many messages does one guy need?

Then he thought of Franny. He ignored the throbbing pain coursing through his body and dashed toward the bedroom in the back, jumping over the remnants of a dining room chair. The door was shut, and he crashed into it with his shoulder, not wanting to waste time in case it was locked.

His body shut down, unable to process the scene before him. There was blood everywhere. All the furniture in the room had been smashed as well. And Franny lay on the bed. Her face was bruised and bloody, having been punched more than once. *She fought back. My baby fought you sons of bitches.* There were also bruises on her arms, from where whoever held her down. He couldn't tell if she'd been raped (her dress was hiked up, but her panties were still on), but he'd find out. And god have mercy on whoever did it. He was going to burn the city down and sift through the ashes to punish them. But first he did something he'd never done before. Small Change picked up the phone and dialed the police for help.