

Final Notice

Marla saw her in the pharmacy aisle, slipping a bottle of baby aspirin into a maroon bubble coat that came down to her knees. The girl was probably in her twenties, but Marla couldn't be sure--she had her hood, lined with faux fur, pulled around her face, obscuring her features. Marla picked up the phone, prepared to call her manager, but the girl's hood fell down, revealing the rest of her face, and Marla recognized the girl she hadn't seen in over a decade, shoplifting only a few yards away.

It was the seventeenth of December, a fact Marla had realized halfway to work. For the local utility companies, this was the final due date before everything was turned off, the last day they would process a payment before the holidays. Everyone without a checkbook came to the courtesy desk at the last possible minute, hoping to get their money in on time to have gas and electric through the New Year. It happened every year, Marla's personal Black Friday.

The girl in the bubble coat stumbled toward the counter without recognizing Marla--she hardly seemed to notice her surroundings, let alone faces. She stared down at the counter and mumbled something unintelligible.

"What was that?" Marla asked.

"This is due," she said. She reached into a different pocket and produced a folded envelope, the words "Important: Open Immediately!" stamped across the rear flap. She slid it across the counter, letting Marla take the bill from inside. Marla scanned the paper, hoping to confirm her suspicions, and she found the name: Faith McCrenn, a girl who had lived in her home eleven years earlier before vanishing back into the foster program. She stood at the

courtesy counter like she had been thrown across these years to find herself in this grocery store today. Faith owed the electric company four hundred dollars, six months of overdue payments.

Faith had always mumbled. The social workers weren't ever sure if it was a chronic and incurable shyness, or a more pernicious mental problem, but it hardly mattered. The first moment she arrived at the house and Marla introduced herself, the girl stared at the floor and said her name without seeming to open her mouth. It was far from the worst problem Marla and her husband had encountered in their years fostering: Faith did not scream in the night or attack other children or swear through meals, all issues they had seen before. On the day in June they first met her, the social worker sat across the kitchen table and opened Faith's file, explaining where she had come from.

"Her mother got picked up during one of those massage parlor raids," she said. "Which wouldn't have been a big deal if there weren't drugs, but..." She trailed off.

"Is she in prison?" Marla's husband, Luke, always asked these kinds of questions, like he was interested in the sordid backstory of each child. He once explained to Marla that he wanted to know what kind of family they had around, in case they were likely to show up at the house.

"When have they ever?" she asked. Marla had been anxious at the beginning, worried about kids from bad homes and criminal families, but her fears had quickly subsided: they had never had a foster child steal from them, and even if they had, how much would they have gotten? Marla and Luke were not wealthy--they usually had enough, even without the money that came from taking in children, but nothing overtly expensive.

"I just need to know," Luke would say. "For my peace of mind."

Faith's mother got probation, and child protective services had taken her daughter away and placed her into foster care. This would be her third home in as many months.

"Why has she gone through so many?" Marla asked.

"I wish I had an answer for that," the social worker said. "Some kids drift from home to home. They can't get pinned down for some reason. Both other families had good things to say about her, no incidents to speak of, but...well, here we are."

Marla looked into the living room, where Faith was watching television and rooting through a wooden chest. It was filled with secondhand toys from kids who had passed through years before, most of them out-of-date and worn, like toys in a doctor's office waiting room. Faith examined a robot from the early 1980s and discarded it, returning to the box in search of something more current. She glanced up as if she realized Marla was looking at her, and stared back in the same penetrating way she had when she had been introduced. Marla offered Faith a weak smile, which went unreturned.

"It's difficult placing kids when they're her age," the social worker said. "By ten, they have a routine, you know? A way of doing things for themselves. She can cook her own dinner, set her own schedule, like she's already on her own."

In the living room, Faith had given up on the toy box in favor of lying on the couch, sprawled and staring at the ceiling. One leg was on the sofa, the other stretched out, the sole of her foot resting on the carpet. She occupied the room as if it already belonged to her.

"We should get her back to the group home," the social worker said. "We'll look over the paperwork, but since you've fostered before, it should go through quickly. I'll call you in about a week."

By the end of the month, Faith was back at the house, carrying one of her two duffel bags inside. Luke threw the other over his shoulder and followed her in. He took the luggage upstairs and left Marla alone with her. Faith sat at the kitchen table for a few seconds before asking, in that same mumbling voice, “Do you have any soda?” Today she fixed her stare on the refrigerator door, as though she hoped to peer through the metal.

“No, I’m sorry. We don’t normally drink soda. Do you want some juice? Iced tea?”

“Water’s fine. I’m not staying here long, you know.” Marla took her time crossing the kitchen, then turned on the faucet and filled a juice glass before she answered.

“Because your mom will be home soon?”

“No. I don’t stay anywhere. Even when she comes home, I won’t be there long.” Luke came back downstairs before Marla could say anything more, and Marla asked Faith if she wanted to see her new room. She said yes, as if it didn’t matter at all to her, and Marla reminded herself not to be upset. They all started off like this--no one wanted to be in a foster home--but she would come around, like every other kid they had taken in over the past ten years.

The first night Faith was in the house, Marla woke up late, hearing the television on in the living room. She felt for Luke beside her, hardly disturbing him when she smacked his shoulder. She rolled over and checked the clock: it was two o’clock.

Downstairs, Faith sat in the living room, not sprawled on the couch but instead sitting cross-legged in front of it, staring at the loop of an infomercial. She didn’t move when Marla sat down on the couch, and she didn’t know for a few seconds if the girl had even noticed her presence. Finally, Faith mumbled, “Did the noise wake you up?”

“No, I was up,” Marla said. “I had a lot on my mind.”

“That’s why I watch these,” Faith said. “They help me slow my brain down.”

Marla didn't know how to respond--she had never had a foster child say something like this, give her an opportunity to ask more. She worried she would squander it, or somehow say the wrong thing. She wanted to know what Faith was thinking about, but also didn't want to pry. She couldn't ask directly about Faith's mother, or how much Faith knew about what her mother did. Instead, she asked, "Do you usually watch these on your own?"

Faith thought for only a few seconds before she said, "Mostly." Marla did not think she would get any more out of her, but a few seconds later, Faith added, "You can sit and watch too, if you want."

Before her lunch break, Marla pocketed the envelope. Twelve years at the same desk, and she had never done something like this, but today was something new. She took her sandwich to the car instead of sitting in the break room, and she stared at the address on the envelope, trying to remember which neighborhood it was in. Somewhere in town, she thought, but nowhere she had spent any time. She called Luke, and he answered the phone in a whisper.

"I'm sorry," she said, "are you still working? I thought you'd be at lunch."

"I got busy. I'll take a late lunch."

"You had better." It wasn't the lunch itself she worried about as much as the two pills Luke had to take with food in the middle of the day: one for blood pressure, and one for cholesterol. Marla had found them in his pocket a few times on laundry day, still folded in the plastic bag she put them in each morning, and every time, she would admonish Luke, saying things like, "We pay enough for these damn things, you may as well take them."

"You didn't call in the middle of the day just to make sure I'm eating right, did you?"

"No. Something odd happened today."

“Hold on.” Marla heard him cover the phone and make his way outside, his muffled voice telling one of the younger warehouse workers he would be right back. He had been there long enough that no one hassled him about taking five minutes to answer a call, but she still felt guilty for taking time out of his day: what did it matter, her seeing the girl they couldn’t get to stay?

“What do you mean, ‘Something odd’?” Luke asked.

“I saw Faith.” When Luke didn’t answer, Marla wondered if he could have forgotten, and now had no idea whom she was referring to. She realized, though, that he was trying to find the right words to proceed.

“Where?”

“Right here at the counter. Walked up and put her bill on the counter with an envelope full of cash. Didn’t even bother waiting for a receipt.”

“How much was the bill?”

“What?”

“The electric bill. How much did she owe?” Marla glanced at the paper; she had taught herself to look, always, for the largest number on the page that wasn’t the account number.

“Four hundred dollars. Is that really the most important question?”

“Just curious. How did she look?”

“Like hell.” Marla didn’t want to say it--couldn’t bring herself to--but Faith looked a lot like her mother, the one time Marla met her. Instead, she asked, “Do you know where 6 Plumtree Street is?”

“Yeah, why?”

“That’s the address on the bill. I was thinking--”

“Don’t do it. Don’t go over there. For one, it’s a terrible street. The worst. Plus, why would you want to see her again? It’ll only open up old wounds. Forget it.”

Marla said she would, and that her break was over. She still had a half-hour left, but she decided to take it at the end of her shift. She left Faith’s electric bill, folded in half, in her glove compartment; she would need it later.

For the first few weeks, Marla and Faith would approach one another, and then suddenly back away. They repeated their late night television viewing a few more times, neither acknowledging that it had become a kind of ritual. They began to get into rhythms, the way Marla and Luke would with each child that passed through their house. Every afternoon, Faith would sit in the kitchen and do homework, while Marla loaded groceries into the cabinets or got things together for dinner. Sometimes Luke would take over cooking for the night, and on these occasions, Marla pulled her chair from under the kitchen table and sat next to Faith.

“Want me to check your work?” she would ask sometimes, or, “Anything giving you trouble?” These were the questions she had learned to ask, refining her technique with each foster child. There was a way to ask these questions without setting off a fight, without sounding like you didn’t think a child was smart enough, and Marla had adjusted her line of questioning to be almost invisible. Faith would usually shrug in response: she had no use for Marla’s help, no desire for her charity. Like the social worker had said, Faith had her own way of doing things.

Of the kids that had lived in the house prior to Faith, two were dyslexic, three had reading scores well below grade level, and four adamantly—sometimes violently—refused to complete any work outside of class (or in it, if Marla was honest with herself). Faith was different, quickly finishing her homework and then staring sullenly at Marla or Luke. She got good grades and her

IQ was slightly above normal, according to the social worker. When she finished her homework early, Marla would let her help in the kitchen; for a girl of her age, Faith was competent with a knife and a pan. She had long limbs, thin legs that made her tall for her age, and she moved around the kitchen more like an adult than a child. While they worked, she would occasionally lob mumbled questions at Marla: “When did you start working at the store?” or, “Isn’t that a job for teenagers?” Marla would scramble around, trying to field or direct them, always feeling like the girl had some advantage over her.

Marla refused to answer one question: when Faith asked, “Why don’t you have kids of your own?” Marla said, “We don’t talk about that.” She was thankful Luke wasn’t in the room--there was no knowing what effect that question might have on him, what protective instincts would kick in. For Marla, all of their attempts--the fertility shots, the miscarriages--were behind them, the dark parts of their early marriage; Luke had mostly let go, but there were times when something would remind him, and the bitterness would come pouring out. When they first made the decision to foster, he had asked, only once, “Why do pieces of shit get to have kids they don’t even take care of?” Marla had told him not to think like that, that it would only bring them both a lot of grief.

After the first month, Faith settled in, and Marla began to make plans, short road trips to other parts of the state or across the border into New Jersey, to the orchards or parks. Marla bought Faith a pair of decent walking shoes to replace the flimsy canvas ones she had arrived in. These were the small things no one accounted for when they calculated the cost per day of fostering a child: the money provided was enough for basic subsistence, but wasn’t the point to provide a better life, at least temporarily?

Faith opened up--it was a slow process, but soon enough she was having short conversations with Marla, answering questions and talking without too much prodding. She still asked awkward, too-personal questions, but even so, Marla was glad to have her around the house. So many of the children they had fostered before couldn't have a conversation or refused to, and Marla never felt like they were more than transients passing through.

One night, Marla woke Luke up after midnight. She had been lying awake, listening to his snoring and wondering if the television downstairs would turn on that night. While Luke slept, she had stared at the ceiling, approaching and then retreating from what she was about to say to him. He woke up without moving anything but his eyes, his face still pressed against the pillow and his words muffled.

“What if we adopted her?” Marla whispered. Whispering felt right for this conversation, as though the volume might let her take it all back if he didn't go for it.

“But we said--”

“I know. But I've never felt like this before. There's never been any reason to think this way, but now it seems stupid, to say we would absolutely never do it. Right now, that whole conversation seems short-sighted, you know?”

Luke rolled onto his back. “What's to say *this* won't seem short-sighted in a few weeks? Besides, you know she's only in the system for a little while.”

“You know she'll be back. Once you're in, you're in until you're adopted or eighteen.”

Luke sighed. He had this way of sighing that made his whole body seem to deflate. Marla pictured the air coming out of every pore, every inch of his frame exhaling.

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” he asked.

Marla said yes, and Luke quickly fell asleep, leaving her to think alone about what she would do about Faith. She had never experienced this attachment before, not this quickly. There had been other kids that she had loved, in a way, but never with the intention to make them a permanent part of her life.

The afternoon seemed to drag on, the sky darkening early, a steady stream of customers walking up with their folded wads of worn cash. Marla processed each of them with her normal efficiency, the professionalism that had brought her the promotion to manager so quickly. That version of herself--the Marla who would never think of pocketing someone's bill, would never allow someone to miss their overdue payment--seemed a long way off, as though she had set that part aside for the day.

One of the teenage girls she managed, Laura, came in from a cigarette break and sat on the stool behind the counter, typing a message on her cell phone with long painted fingernails. There was a brief lull between customers, and Marla asked her, "What are you doing for Christmas?"

"Going into the city," Laura said. It was always the same answer with some of these girls, always the same trip to New York, back to where they thought they belonged. They said they missed the congestion, the knowledge that there was always something within walking distance. For Marla, it was the exact opposite: she had been to New York only a few times, but was always relieved when she returned and could breathe clean air again.

She wondered--but did not ask--why they were so obsessed with escaping, when the whole reason their parents uprooted them was to give them a chance to grow up outside of the crowded blocks and subways. There was space here, at least: wasn't that better, sometimes? You

could still walk in the woods here, could still find a spot without the sound of traffic. They were close enough to amenities; there was enough to do. What would you find, escaping?

Laura asked Marla what she was doing for the holidays, and Marla had to stop and think for a minute: no kids in the house at the moment, only her and Luke. They would probably drive out to his sister's in Washington, New Jersey to see their nieces and nephews. Church on Christmas Eve before Marla stayed up watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. It would make her cry, like it always did; that had become as much of a holiday tradition for her as driving out to the Christmas tree farm with Luke.

She only told Laura about the first part--she would understand leaving town to be with family members. The rest, Marla kept to herself--it was a private ritual, not to be shared. Besides, it was not something she could explain, even to herself: she had no specific memory tied to the movie, but she cried for the world it mocked her with, the full house at the end of the film, the people surrounding him in the final moment.

Two weeks after she pitched her idea to Luke, Marla found herself at the county office of Child Protective Services. She had been there a few times before, meeting with case workers or bringing a child back into their custody. She could say without exaggeration that it was one of her least favorite places on earth. There was a drabness to it, a grey institutional stillness far more dismal than the bright fluorescence of the grocery store. At work, she could at least take a break and wander through the produce aisle for some color and variety. Here, the plastic chairs seemed designed for minor discomfort and the tall desk held a single receptionist repeating phrases like "We'll be with you in just a few minutes" like they were mantras.

Faith's social worker came out into the lobby and told Marla to follow her back to the offices, down a dim hallway leading to the back of the building. In the office, at least, the chairs were slightly more comfortable, though Marla sat at the edge of one while the social worker spoke. She said everything Marla expected her to: it was a long process, there were no guarantees, the costs could be prohibitive. Marla wondered how it was less expensive to keep children in the system, paying stipends to foster parents, than to find permanent homes.

"What's our first step?" Marla asked when it was her turn to speak.

The social worker opened the squeaking bottom drawer of her desk and produced a manilla folder. She slid several papers across the desk. Marla glanced quickly at them, spotting a form where she had to fill in her income, her expenses, all numbers that would be entered into the system to find out if they could provide a stable home. She wondered what questions weren't on there, what couldn't be quantified: willingness to make sacrifices, skills in negotiating behavior problems.

"You'll want to take that home and fill it out with your husband," the social worker said. "When you're ready, you'll return it to me, and we'll file it with the state and see what happens."

Marla would return with that form, and a few weeks later, she would return with yet another form, this one even more official, more intent on determining their suitability as parents. There was one more hurdle, though: since Faith's mother was not in prison or declared incompetent, they had to get her to agree to put her daughter up for adoption.

The day they met with her, Marla expected a fight. She thought Faith's mother would be like every other parent they had ever dealt with, pissed off that someone else was trying to raise their kid and angry with the state for telling them they weren't doing an adequate job. Faith's mother, Laureen, was neither: she sat in the living room and calmly lit a cigarette even before

Marla could find one of the old glass ashtrays they had inherited from Luke's mother. The social worker sat with several folders spread in front her on the coffee table, all ignored by Faith's mother.

"Why do you want her?" Laureen asked.

"There are a lot of reasons," Marla said. Faith sat in the kitchen, not quite out of earshot. As Marla explained the reasons she wanted to adopt, she was conscious of talking loud enough to be heard from the next room. She had to make her case to both mother and daughter. "We've become close over these past few months, and she's doing better in school, so this is obviously a good environment for her. I think she's happy here, and we're happy with her here."

Laureen pushed a strand of her mousy hair away from her face, and Marla got a clear look at her: her face was sunken, her cheekbones protruding. She wouldn't make eye contact with anyone around the table, and didn't speak until she had finished her first cigarette and lit another.

"I won't lie," she said. "There's not much for her at home. She's probably told you that, and she's right to."

Marla felt her pulse quicken--was this the permission she needed? Was this woman agreeing to let her daughter go? If so, they could sign the paperwork that afternoon, and it would be official soon. The social worker asked Laureen if she would consent, and Faith, sensing there was something major happening in the next room, came in from the kitchen. Marla hadn't noticed it earlier, but she seemed to revert in the presence of her mother, to become the gloomy, silent girl she had been when she first arrived. Marla motioned for her to sit on the sofa next to her.

“Your mom agreed to let us adopt you,” she said. Faith stared at her own knees. “Isn’t that great? Like we talked about?”

Faith looked up and stared straight at her mother. Lauren stared back and offered a smile; Marla noticed she was missing her top left incisor. She noticed everything about that moment, and would replay it for years because of what Faith said next.

“I want to go back with her.” She offered no more explanation, but after that Lauren wouldn’t sign any of the paperwork. Her probation had come to an end the week before, so Faith was free to leave with her. Marla sat on the couch, stunned, as if Faith had done her some physical violence instead of simply choosing to go home with her own mother. Luke went upstairs and helped her to pack the duffel bags, and then he carried them out to the social worker’s car. He completed both of these tasks in silence, as though he wanted to avoid further complications by stifling his anger. When they left, Marla went straight to bed and remained there until Monday, when she went back to work behind her desk.

Marla drove to the address printed at the top of the bill, a cul-de-sac off a street notorious for drugs and crimes. Plumtree Street was not in much better shape, two rows of one-story homes leading to a dilapidated Victorian set at the end like a keystone. It loomed over the block like a castle, originally built by a coal tycoon and surrounded by the clapboard houses that had once housed his workers. But that was a century ago; now, the grand house was boarded up, a place for strays both animal and human.

Most of the small houses had lights on. One or two had Christmas decorations up, some small effort to combat the gloom of the neighborhood. Marla inched down the block reading

house numbers until she spotted the one she was looking for. She parked in front of a house two doors down and sat for a few seconds.

Marla had not planned past this moment; what did she think she would do once she found Faith's house? She couldn't knock on the door and expect a warm reception--she was a stranger now, more than she ever had been. Still, she could not convince herself to leave yet. She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out, closing the door as quietly as possible. She would walk past the mailbox, one look, and then she would go home. There was no need for Luke to know she had even stopped.

Faith's house had a string of lights draped on the porch, knotted around a leaning bannister to the left of the door. The door itself was yellow, a tarnished silver "6" affixed above an ornate knocker that looked as if it had been salvaged from the coal-boss's house. Maybe it was the holiday, but standing at the base of the stairs, she thought of the ghost of Christmas past, Scrooge looking into the windows of a history he could not change.

Later that night, Marla would try to figure out what had carried her up the few stairs to the front porch. If she had mentioned it to Luke, he would have repeated his warning about old wounds, but it was more complicated: Marla wanted to know who the girl had become, what had brought her to the store that afternoon.

She stood on the porch, trying to position her body so she could look inside without being seen. She told herself she was acting insane, that she had no right to be there, that she could be arrested for prowling, but she couldn't walk away. Finally, she had a clear line of sight into the living room, and she gasped when she saw Faith holding a boy of about four.

Faith put her lips to his forehead, as if she was checking his temperature. She smiled and said something Marla could not interpret; she assumed his fever had broken, or some other sign

of a slight recovery. Marla watched for a few minutes, the two of them sitting on the couch, until she felt cold and crept back to her car. There, she opened her glove compartment and looked at the unpaid electric bill. She pulled the cash from the envelope and walked back toward the house before shoving the bills in the mailbox and closing the lid.

Back in the car, she wrote a check for the full amount and stuffed it into the envelope. If Luke asked why they were suddenly missing four hundred dollars--he was bound to notice--she would tell him the truth. But for the moment, she sat alone with the car turned off, looking at the light coming from Faith's house as though she was waiting for it to suddenly go out.