

Dora the Explorer

I used to watch the news all the time, especially this little blonde girl that covered the afternoon shift on CNN. Her name was Selena Cassaday, and she read the news like she knew me and I was the only one could hear her. She read the news like she spent her whole life waiting for two o'clock, when she knew I'd be turning on the television. She'd spent the morning in wardrobe and makeup, and when she looked at me, I knew that every story was written just for me. She didn't joke about the stories, or make small talk with her partner, sharing private meanings like lovers under the bed sheets. I liked looking at her. I'm not a fossil yet. Sometimes I'd even think about what it would be like to have her come home to me at night, after the news, and how I could take care of her and help her wind down from the stress of being the person that tells everyone else about how the world is going to hell.

To be honest, if she didn't look the way she did I wouldn't know anything.

For years the news has been the same. It has always been bad. Having someone decent to look at, though, made the day go by quicker. Someone pretty, someone with a little bit of class. Someone that might have given me a second look forty years ago. I don't tolerate abrasive shows on daytime television. You know what I mean: Shows with judges who think being a smart-ass is more entertaining than upholding the law; white trash flouncing their cleavage and tattoos, bleeping out every other word; talk show hosts moralizing about stray dogs and dog pounds and the "objectification" of women in society,

whatever that means. I just flip through the channels until I find a woman it don't hurt to look at.

The day I want to talk about, Selena Cassady was the only thing going. Rain rattling on the roof of the trailer drowned out her voice, which badly disappointed me, so I just watched her and tried to ignore the words running across the bottom of the screen. It was hard to do. Like trying to watch a TV show when someone has the captions turned on. You can't pay attention to what the people on screen are doing and read at the same time, and what they type never matches exactly what they say. Even I can tell that they don't always get the spelling right. Point is, if the words are on there you can't not read them. I don't need the words. I just turn the volume up to 30 and that works fine. There's nobody here to complain.

Sometime during that day Hannah called to talk. I mean Hannah's mother called and handed the phone to Hannah, my great-granddaughter, who is three years old. Her mother does that almost every day, usually about the time Hannah gets bored with television and starts tugging on her mother to pay attention to her. Truth be told, I'd just as soon talk to Hannah as I would her mother. Ginger never was a very bright kid.

I turned down the volume on the TV and tried to talk to Hannah, but even without the rain, I usually only get every third or fourth word, which, according to Selena, is how a dog hears humans. Hannah was full of news: Best I could tell she'd seen a cat outside her window and there was a mud puddle where mommy

parked the car. She'd gotten a free cookie from the Wal-Mart bakery, where she and her mother had gone Christmas shopping.

"What's Santa Claus going to bring you?" I asked.

"Dora the Explorer."

"Who's that?"

I picked out the words "backpack" and "map." "You want a backpack and a map?" I asked.

She tried to explain, but I couldn't figure it out. I hung up knowing about as much as I did when I started, so I knew I'd be heading to Wal-Mart sooner or later to find out exactly who this Dora was. Hannah was talking about a monkey and a fox now, and then she blurted out: "Daddy's going on a long trip," real loud.

"A long trip? Where?"

"Eye, Eye. Eye-something."

"Iraq?"

"He rides a hummerbird."

"Where's your mother. Put her on the phone."

"She said I should talk to you until she gets back."

Ever since Hannah was big enough to pay attention to her mother, Ginger'd stopped smoking in the house. Now she just called me up and handed the phone to Hannah while she stepped outside for a couple of cigarettes.

We talked about tea parties, and after a while Ginger finally got on the phone.

"What's this about Tommy going back to Iraq?" I asked.

Ginger coughed in my ear and cleared her throat. “The 39th got called up last month. Don’t you ever watch the news?”

“I must have missed it.”

“Christmas in Falujah,” Ginger croaked. “I cry my eyes out ever night after I put Hannah to bed. I wasn’t cut out to be no soldier’s wife.”

Over the next couple of days I couldn’t get Tommy out of my head, and I spent ever minute I could glued to the television, trying to figure out what was happening in Iraq. It didn’t really matter to me if Selena was giving the news or not, but it made it better when she did.

I don’t want you to take this wrong—it wasn’t about Tommy. He had narrow-set eyes and a slack jaw that made me question exactly how faithful my granddaughter had been to him every time I looked for his face in Hannah’s. Tommy was about as smart as the gear shift on my pickup, lazy enough to make a city employee jealous, and just enough of a jackass to make me think a tour in Iraq dodging road-side bombs and jabbering with camel jockeys might make him a better human being when he came back. Three years ago I wouldn’t have cared if he did get killed. Fact of the matter, I would have been happy for Ginger to have a chance to do better. But now that Hannah had come along, I couldn’t stand the thought of her not having a daddy, even such a daddy as God had chosen to give her.

It hurts me to think about how I didn't do right by my own family, years ago, when I was the age of Tommy and my girls were a few years older than Hannah. It was drinking that done it. My wife left me and I ended up with an old girl with bad breath and the law breathing down our neck over her bad checks. My girls grew up without a daddy. It never bothered me about the way I done my wife. She had faults of her own, but what killed me was I used to come riding home after work and my girls would bubble out of the house to see me. I was better than the ice cream man and a trip to the dollar store with money in your pocket to burn. My oldest used to just light up when she'd look up from playing and realize I was watching her. It'd melt my heart. But after I moved out and her mother got through talking about me, that girl wouldn't look at me at all. I was dead to the oldest, and the youngest never knew me for more than a stranger. I was lucky that my ex-wife let me get to know the grandkids once they started to come along. She'd invite me over when she was keeping them. Ginger especially took on to me. She let me come to her high school graduation, invited me to her wedding, and even let me get to know Hannah. Hannah's voice would light up over the phone when I talked to her, and I imagined that same look my oldest girl used to give me.

I figured out who Dora the Explorer was by accident. I was watching Selena one day when she did a story on defective toys being recalled. The toys

had been manufactured in China, of all places, and there it was on the screen, big as Stone Mountain, a Dora the Explorer bedside lamp. The toy itself was frightening enough, let alone the defect. Dora was this little Mexican girl with a giant head and eyes ten sizes too big. I mean her head was as big as the rest of her body—It was like the lamp shade I guess—which was attached to a spring so it jiggled when you touched it. Selena had a toy safety expert on the show with her and he said the toy was dangerous because it could tip over easily. Selena was horrified. She actually said, “that’s horrific.”

All I could think about was Hannah lying in her crib with flames spreading up the slats. I thought about it a long time. Then I decided to drive down to Wal-Mart and take a look for myself.

The parking lot was crowded and I got stuck behind some fat old lady who parked in the middle of the lane and waited for somebody in the first couple of slots to come out and leave, so she wouldn’t have to walk an extra hundred feet. I don’t know what the woman thought she was going to do once she got inside the store. The store looked as big as the Astrodome to me. She’d probably borrow one of them little mechanized scooters I guess. After a minute or two I whipped around her and then had to slam on the brakes to miss some kid rolling in a string of empty carts. He gave me a look and shook his head and then bent

back down to his work. I finally got a spot to park and nearly got run over ten or twelve times just getting to the front door.

I hadn't been in a Wal-Mart for fifteen years. Back then, everything they sold was Made in America. Now you can't buy anything not made by the red Chinese. I've been in a big place or two, and noisy at that, but I hadn't been in anything bigger than Fred's dollar store since my last trip to Wal-Mart. I had forgotten how many things there were in that world that a person could buy, given enough money, time, and the inclination. At first I just wandered around, staring like a country boy on his first trip to town. Now there was a hair salon, an eye doctor, a bank, and even a medical clinic. The grocery section was bigger than my trailer park. I got nervous at the sheer energy and size of the place. I waited patiently at intersections, assuming the rule of the four way stop more or less applied. But women nearly ran me down with massive carts loaded down like the radio had predicted a winter storm, simultaneously pulling cartons off shelves, talking into cell phones, and shoving bottles in their dirty babies' mouths to make them shut up. Greasy looking Mexicans chattered at one another like bickering squirrels. Troops of teenage girls took up the aisle and wouldn't break ranks to make room for an old man. Happy looking men pushed flat bed carts loaded with television boxes the size of my pickup, usually with an angry looking woman not far behind. Wal-Mart even had their own television station beaming from TVs mounted to the ceiling, just in case you had missed a chance to buy one more thing.

After what seemed like forever I found the toy section, and then I wandered another thirty minutes before I found what I was looking for. It looked harmless enough, there in the package. The lamp I mean. I couldn't imagine having that little Mexican girl all lit up on my bedside table though, staring at me through those giant eyes. I looked around but there was no one on the aisle with me at the moment. I took out my pocket knife and slit the tape and pried the box open, only to find the lamp was wired to the bottom of the package. I slit the edges of the box open with my knife and peeled them back like a banana. A couple of the wires still kept the spring from working, so I untwisted them and freed Dora. The lamp felt top-heavy, but I couldn't be sure, so I cleared a spot on the shelf and set it there, then pulled the lamp cord. It tipped right over. There were about fifteen of the lamps left, at \$12.95 each. I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew I had to do something.

I took the lamp and went wandering until I found someone looked like a manager. He was a short little fellow in a blue employee's vest, and I guess he'd been working there long enough to spot a customer who wanted to ask a question, because he shifted his gaze and put his head down and tried to sneak past me. I reached out and grabbed him by the vest.

"Excuse me, Sir," I started. "Are you aware that CNN News listed this toy among the top ten most dangerous toys of the Christmas season?"

"What's it doing open like that?" the guy said. "Did you tear the packaging?"

"Uh, no. I found it like that."

“We got surveillance cameras if you did,” the guy said. “That means you have to buy it.”

“I can’t afford that. I’m on a fixed income. I’m just trying to report a safety hazard. I thought your bosses might like to avoid getting sued.”

The guy looked at me a moment, sizing me up, then glanced both ways down the aisle. “Okay, let me go check on this with my boss,” he said. “I’ll see what we can do about clearing the shelves. Just wait here.” He took the lamp and walked off fast without looking back to make sure I was waiting.

I sort of needed to go take a leak, but I waited anyway. The shopping around me picked up, then lulled, and picked up again. I was getting close to the point of losing control. I thought I saw the guy I’d talked to once, ten aisles away, but I couldn’t be sure and I didn’t have the time to go looking. I headed for the restrooms. By that time I knew the employee had been jerking me around. He’d probably headed off for his break and stuck the lamp on the first shelf he came to. The more I thought about it, the madder I got, and by the time I got back from the restroom I knew I had to do something.

There was a little girl holding one of the lamps when I got back, showing it to her father. She was a little older than Hannah, but not by much I guessed. I stopped short and pretended interest in some god-awful ugly doll dressed like a prostitute, another toy with giant eyes—and listened to the girl. She had curly red hair and wore house shoe slippers. It was clear her parents didn’t have sense enough to even dress her well in winter, let alone protect her life.

“I want it,” she said. “This will help me go to sleep at night so you don’t have to keep coming into my room and telling me to hush up.”

The father, another slack-jawed, pimple faced kid like Tommy, having kids before he’s old enough to call himself a man, took the package and eyed it like it was a piece of machinery he couldn’t quite figure out, shrugged his shoulders, and handed it back to the girl.

“Whatever makes you happy,” he said. “Come on and let’s get out of here.”

“Hold on a minute, Sir,” I said. I reached down and took the package from the little girl. She didn’t let it go easily.

“What the--?” The father looked at me, and I knew that if I hadn’t been an old guy I’d be lying on the floor by now. No one wants to be seen beating up senior citizens. I knew I had one chance to say my piece.

“I know this to be a dangerous toy,” I said. “It’s a matter of life or death.”

“There’s a dozen more on the shelves,” the father said. “Go get your own.”

“No. This toy is on the top ten list,” I said.

“I’m scared, Daddy,” the little girl said. “I don’t want it. Can we go home now?”

I could see the girl meant it, and I gave her a smile meant to be reassuring. “It’s made in China anyway,” I said.

“Everything I own is made in China,” the father said. “Come on Carley.”

He grabbed the girl's shoulder and backed her down the aisle, watching me like he might watch a snake or a pit bull. They got to the main aisle and disappeared, and I looked down at the toy in my hands.

I carried the lamp to the front of the store and held it while I waited in the express check out lane. When it got to be my turn the girl reached for the package to scan it without even looking at me or wishing me a Merry Christmas or anything.

"I'm going to take this outside and stomp it on the sidewalk," I told her. "You can call the police and I'll be waiting out there."

"What?"

I repeated myself, then pushed on out toward the door, holding the lamp slightly away from my body like the dangerous thing it was. On the sidewalk I peeled away the packaging like before, set the lamp on the ground, and stomped the evil smile off the little Mexican girl's face. People hurrying into the store barely paused to see what I was doing, but they gave me a wide berth. A little boy pulled away from his parents and tried to pick up a fragment of Dora the Explorer, but I warned him away, telling him it was a dangerous toy.

"Sir. You'll need to come back inside with us," I heard a man say, and when I looked up I was surrounded by four men holding Walkie Talkies. They looked angry.

"I told the girl I was going to do it," I said.

"I know, Sir. You'll need to come back inside with us and wait on the police."

“Yes sir,” I said.

A crowd had gathered, and even though one of the store detectives was trying to break them up, they were all of them looking at me. I’m sure some of them saw a monster, and some of them saw a confused old man. One little girl smiled at me and I heard her tell her mother, “That man looks like grandpa.”

As they led me to the back of the store, I felt good about myself. Sometimes when you know in your heart that there's a toy that can destroy babies and people and children, you have to do something.