

A Very Quiet Child

Mary Lou tried to sit easy on one of the tiny primary school chairs that were lined up in a perfect row against the wall in the elementary school corridor. She wanted to feel welcomed in spite of the fluorescent lights that cast too bright a glare across the worn tile floor in front of the classroom. The other chairs were empty except for an impatient-looking salesman type sitting at the far end. Mary Lou studied him. He looked back at her with a quizzical expression.

“Been waiting long?” His quick, modulated voice confirmed her first impression, her memory.

“A bit. Why do you ask?”

“Because these conferences are stupid.” It was funny how filled he had always been with his own importance. And still was. “The wife made me come ‘cause the baby was sick. Screaming and throwing up. Had to cancel a big meeting with the boss.”

“How many children you got?”

“Two. Girls. Sometimes it feels like two too many. How about you?”

“One. Elizabeth.” Mary Lou wondered why she’d said that and why he had any children at all.

“I know you.”

“I doubt it.” Mary Lou let impatience creep into her voice. She didn’t like personal questions anymore.

“You sure?”

“I just moved here last fall.” *Had it been only then? Each day seemed like a vague forever.*

“You’re sure real pretty. ”

Before she could answer, the metal classroom door swung open and a young teacher appeared.

“Mr. Johnson... Craig. You can come in now. I’m Mrs. Geiger.... Lisa to you. Remember me? “The teacher hesitated as through reminding herself of something from a long time ago. “When did I see you last anyway? I guess it was Saturday morning three years ago. You were out shopping. At least that’s what you said. And now... you’re here for my first student conference. Small world.” She turned toward Mary Lou and lowered her voice. “Ms. Simpson, it’ll be a bit longer. Please wait. We have to talk.”

Mary Lou watched as Lisa Geiger sidestepped ever so slightly to stare straight at her. But why shouldn’t she? She was Elizabeth’s teacher after all.

“Yes. Why don’t you wait? I’d like that.” Johnson’s parting request hung unfinished in the air. The smooth voice seemed to smile, caressing Mary Lou with its careful implications just like before. She averted her eyes and said nothing. Abruptly, as though fearful of losing her declared client, Lisa Geiger guided Mr. Johnson into her classroom.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Mary pulled out a cigarette and looked guiltily up and down the hallway. She lit the cigarette, puffed a couple of times, then hurriedly stamped it out. She picked up the crushed stub and put it gingerly into her purse. *Why did he have to be here? Tonight of all nights?* She stared at the now shut classroom door and uncrossed her long legs. Carefully she pulled a red velvet hair ribbon out of her jeans pocket and played with it, winding it over and over around her index finger. A multitude of thoughts played heavily in her mind.

He was Elizabeth's father all right, but she'd never told Elizabeth. She'd wanted to many times, but had never been able to somehow. Elizabeth was too much a part of her now to risk that kind of honesty. But it was okay. She didn't have to let Elizabeth's father know the truth. She'd never give him any reason to come near Elizabeth. It would stay just the two of them. Elizabeth and her without him.

She signed with relief. She was thinking things through better this time. She would stay here tonight and have the school conference, just as though nothing had happened, and when she got home, she'd put up Elizabeth's hair and make it pretty and forget all this nonsense. Red velvet ribbon always looked beautiful when wrapped around Elizabeth's dark hair. She'd have to remember to use it more often.

"I told you, Teacher. My kid's doing just fine. The likes of you can't tell me any different." His arrogant voice broke into Mary's reverie. She looked up to see Johnson standing in the open doorway. "Don't act so high and mighty, Lisa. You weren't any smarter than me in school, and you aren't any better now that you're Mrs. Liza Geiger, teacher, instead of just plain old Lisa Thomas, high school student. I was a first-string football star. Remember? You were only a "Chickie." Mary Lou shrugged at the arrogant outburst. *He hadn't changed. Never would.*

"Craig Johnson. You shouldn't talk like that. It's tough talking to parents about their kids." Lisa voice sounded a bit intimidated. Silently, she motioned toward Mary Lou. "I'll be back as soon as I finish giving him his kid's report." Then she frowned. "Sometimes I wonder why I ever took this job with all the stupid stuff this district insists we do. "

"Right, Lisa. Go do your stupid report. But there. Not here." Johnson smirked at the self-conscious look on Lisa's face. "Don't worry though. We two out here will work on getting acquainted a bit more like always."

“Any problems?” Mary Lou hoped Johnson heard the deliberate sarcasm in her voice. She crumpled the red velvet ribbon and stuffed it deeper into her pocket.

“Nope. But enough of this parent stuff. It’s boring. Let’s talk about you. “

“Me?”

“Yeah. You. You’re still good looking, you know. The kind that has a jealous hubby at home I bet. Right?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because if I was him, that’s how it’d be.” Nobody messes with what’s mine, especially when it’s special.”

“And maybe even when it’s not?” *Why had she said that? Perhaps she was finally going to let herself be honest?*

“What’s that mean?”

“However you want to take it.” Mary Lou stared at him blankly. Her eyes felt cold and unmoving in their sockets.

“That you’d like to have a little fun, but nothing serious. Am I close?” Johnson chuckled, and his features softened. He was still handsome. But then she knew he always would be.

“That was always your angle. Smooth and fast. Until the last time. When we did the bad thing. Rather you did. Remember?”

“Be serious. I know you’re Mary Lou Wilson. I told myself I’d never forget your pretty face or the rest of you either. That was pretty great too.”

“I told you! You’re mistaken!”

“C’mon. Don’t play games. Remember? You and me? Jackson High School? The last half of senior year? I saw you tonight and looked twice. Old habits and good times die hard.” Johnson laughed again, this time short and hard.

Mary Lou squirmed in the child's chair. She started to get up, but Johnson grabbed her by the arm and set her back down roughly.

"I wonder maybe you have something you should want to tell me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about your kid. The one that's here. Elizabeth is it? Is she mine?"

"No, damn it! She came afterwards."

"After what?"

"The abortion." There. She'd said it.

"An abortion? You? Really? You said you despised abortions. Remember?"

"That was before that one summer. After..." Everyone had told her it was best, even proper, considering the circumstances and all.

"So it was true. God Damn! I kind of thought maybe... but I didn't want to ask. It was easier, you know. Considering what happened. Just let things sit where they were. Right? Besides..."

"You had plans. Right? A fun time with someone else and maybe a job if you ever got the urge." She'd never let him near Elizabeth.

Johnson shook his head. "Another kid! That kind of shakes a fellow up a bit. Wonder what he would of been like. It'd been a boy of course." He looked at Mary intently. "Do you think it was a boy? Do you think?"

"What?" Her mind felt fuzzy.

"They say a gal can always tell. It's ESP or something like that."

"It was nothing. That's what it was. Not a boy or a girl. Nothing. Just like us."

Mary Lou felt her throat constricting and closing up.

"What happened anyway? You know. Afterwards?"

"I worked my way through State, got a degree. Then got married and had Elizabeth. Became Mary Simpson. That all ended a year ago too. Up north."

“I’m into computers now. Manage a store on the north side of town out by the old mall. Doing real good too. Even got me a couple of swanky doodads with my last bonus check. See?” Johnson pointed to a gold tie tack and a diamond pinky ring gleaming on his left hand. Too objectively, Mary Lou noticed he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring.

“You got to impress the customers these days if you’re going to pull in the big bucks. Just like I had to impress you. And I did.” He smiled. “Remember? And you sure were impressed back then!” He laughed again.

“So maybe you got a wife now too? With all those special skills and all?”

“Remember Jenny Hawkins? She took a liking to me the fall after graduation. We didn’t wait long to do it. Tied the knot after only three months.”

“That was quick.”

“Quick’s always best. Clean and easy. No complications. Like us and what we had.”

Craig was silent for a moment. “Say, how about a quick drink? For old times’ sake and all. The wife’s busy tonight. That other thing was an accident. A bad break. It doesn’t have to happen that way again. “Mary Lou sensed the intimate warmth of his arm across her shoulder and remembered.

“It won’t.”

“Hey! It wasn’t just me. You had ideas too. You thought everything was okay then. Us coming on to each other like we did. It was just... you know... Unexpected. What happened. The bad. Is that the right word for it?”

“Sometimes it was okay. Really. Like that time on the roller coaster when the cars got stuck, and I was really afraid, and you were sweet. Awful sweet.” Mary Lou felt the wall inside her melting. A touch of a smile edged at the corners of her mouth.

“I’m still sweet.” His green eyes caught hers for an instant. He WAS sweet. And certainly good looking. Still sexy too. She had to admit it. His smile had always told her he was special, but only when it suited him and for what he was after. She had to remember he always got what he wanted. Always. Her eyes dropped.

“Not sweet enough.” She had to remember what happened. None of it could start up again.

Johnson laughed. “I can see you’re still the same Mary Lou Wilkins. Stubborn, but classy.”

“You’re wrong. I’m different now.”

“Are you sure no doctor ever told you it was a boy?” Johnson stopped abruptly at the sudden look on Mary’s face. “Sorry. It was just a thought.”

“The wrong thought.” Mary hitched her pocketbook up higher on her shoulder. “It’s sure nice to know you still have that same special flair for getting directly to the point.”

“You’re right. It’s late. Got to get home. You know, it was sort of good. Seeing you again and all. Guess this evening wasn’t a total waste after all.” He smiled again, the same sweet smile she still remembered so well. Then he turned and walked away.

Mary Lou watched as he strode down the dark school corridor. After he turned the hall corner and went off toward the front exit, she found herself staring at the empty spot where he had been. Behind her, the classroom door squeaked open, then clicked shut.

“I’m glad you stayed. I hope I can help. That’s the best thing about teaching. Helping.” The teacher sat down next to Mary Lou. It was Lisa, an old friend from when they’d all been in school together.

“I want to tell you about Elizabeth.” Mary Lou’s words tumbled out like a rushing spring stream. “She’s the shy, tiny girl with the dark eyes in the front seat of the

far row by the window. Right next to your desk. Elizabeth loves school so much. She can't wait to come here every day. I think that's because she's real smart and well ahead of all the other children her age." Mary Lou paused. She smiled, but then the smile melted into sudden concern. "Do you think being gifted will be difficult for her? I want her to be like all the other boys and girls and have fun in school. Make lots of friends." She took Lisa's hand in both of hers. "Can you help me make everything perfect for Elizabeth? Can you, Lisa?"

Her former friend hesitated. "I want to help. You know I do... but there's something I have to tell you. I should have told you before, when I saw you walking in the halls here after school."

"Is there something wrong with Elizabeth? There can't be. She's a perfect daughter. And you're a good teacher. You're young like me, and I'm sure you love children. Tell me what's wrong. I know we can fix whatever it is and do it together."

Lisa's eyes searched Mary Lou's face. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say... how to say it. This is difficult."

"But you're Elizabeth's teacher. You should want to tell me about Elizabeth. How she is doing. "Mary Lou's voice trembled. A tinge of desperation colored her words. "You said to wait out here, that you would talk to me after your conference with Craig. "

"Elizabeth is not my student. I told you before that she doesn't go to school here."

"Yes, she does. I drop her off every morning on my way to work."

"You don't. Elizabeth's not here. She never has been. She's with you. Just you. Please believe what I'm saying. Try and understand. I went to Jackson High too. I heard about you and Craig. I was always sorry about what happened. The incident. It was awful. Everybody talked about it. All the talk hurt you more."

“Elizabeth’s a quiet child. That’s why you can’t remember her being in class. You said before that she’s awfully sweet. I heard you say once she was doing so well. Don’t you remember?”

“I’m sorry. That was someone else. I want to help. I really do, but....” Liza paused, uncertain now how to proceed. “I have to go find the custodian. He locks up when I leave. Here.” Lisa handed Mary Lou a slip of paper. “I got this number for you from the main office when I saw you were here tonight. Take it. Call it. Maybe someone there can help.” Lisa gently touched her shoulder. Her fingers paused there ever so briefly, kindly. “Tell them about Elizabeth. And the other. Please, Mary. Do that.”

Lisa smoothed her skirt, grasped her briefcase a bit too tightly, then turned and walked away down the hall. Mary Lou watched her go, listening to her short, sharp heels click rapidly across the tiles. She strained to discern her image, as it receded into the quiet darkness of the school and shivered. Quickly, she pulled another cigarette out of her bag, lit it and took a long deep drag of the acrid-tasting cloud.

There was no other way! I made a choice. That’s all. A choice. Everyone told me it was simple. Easy. The best way to forget what happened.

She stood up and meticulously straightened the seat she had occupied, so it fit neatly back into its well- ordered place next to the wall. She finished her cigarette, ground it into the tile, then stepped back and admired her handiwork. The line of chairs was now perfect.

“It’s time to be getting home,” She quietly told herself. “Elizabeth will still be awake. She always waits up for me. She straightened the row of tidy chairs. At the classroom door, she stopped and peered through the glass window. The front seat of the far row by the window, wasn’t it? Right by the teacher’s desk. The darkness in the room strained her eyes. She had to concentrate. Then she saw her. Elizabeth was bent over, book open, her dark hair tied back with a red ribbon. As if on cue, she ceased reading

and glanced up. A smile danced across her face, and her dark eyes laughed in recognition. Then the image faded into the black silence of the empty classroom. Mary Lou paused, then turned and left the school. She knew what she had to do now.

The printed file felt hot in her hands, and she held it silently, afraid to discover what she knew she had to know. It had taken so long to learn everything, but she knew she had to take that final step. She opened the file and read it slowly, taking in every word, indeed every syllable, until she found what she needed. Her old school friend at City Hall had been wonderful, getting her the file, probably illegally. She hoped he wouldn't get into any trouble, lose his job, or worse. She smiled. Sometimes men were wonderful. Then she paused, remembering Craig again and that terrible night when she had said "No" and he had just persisted to get what he wanted and felt was his no matter what she thought or said or felt. She took out her phone and noted what she had entered, carefully. It had all the details she needed. It was time, she thought. Time indeed.

It had been a long bus ride and a disturbing one, deeply emotional, but she had made her decision, so she couldn't look back. Not now. She walked slowly through the suburban neighborhood she had never seen before and searched carefully for the address she had written on the note clutched in her hand. The note read 2127 Parkview Court. She searched through the three courts on the long suburban street and came to a park that spread out clean and green from the neighborhood. It was there she found Parkview Court. . It overlooked a local park right across the street, a lovely active park. She noticed a lot of children were there enjoying life with their parents. She turned and

entered the court, searched for the right house number – 2127. The residences here were large and clean and all well cared for, pristine just like the park.

It was then she saw the lemonade stand. It stood right in front of the house she had been looking for – 2127 Parkview. She checked the address on her note and knew she'd found her destination. Then she saw the little girl. She was standing behind the lemonade stand with her dog, ready to sell her lemonade to any customers who came by.

“Hello. Would you like a lemonade? I made it myself, and I think it is really very good. Not too sweet. Not too sour. Just right.”

Mary Lou reached out her hand in friendship and said, “Of course. I love lemonade. Ever since I was small. I'm glad you do too. I use to sell it when I was your age.

“Really? That's great. My name is Elizabeth. I'd like you to meet my dog too. His name is Boy Boy. That's because he is a boy and the sweetest dog you'll ever know.” She laughed. Mary Lou noticed it was a happy laugh.

Mary Lou was thunderstruck. Elizabeth was the name she had written on that birth certificate ten years ago. “That's a beautiful name. So is the name of your doggy. It fits him too. He's a boy dog. “She laughed remembering Craig. He hadn't been sweet at the last. Not at all. But male dogs were. “Is this your house? How long have you lived here?

“Ever since I can remember. It's my home.” The little girl handed Mary Lou her lemonade in a big paper cup. “That will be 35 cents please. I wouldn't charge you except I'm trying to raise some money to help our soccer team get more equipment. “

Mary Lou handed her a dollar. “Keep the change. I use to play soccer too.”

Suddenly, another young girl came running up to the stand.

“How are the sales going? You making any money?” We really need a new soccer ball. Desperately.” And she laughed. Then she saw the visitor. “Elizabeth is my very best friend. She makes great lemonade. And she's a great soccer player too. “

Mary Lou nodded in agreement and didn't say a word. She couldn't. So, this was her Elizabeth all these years later. Happy and agile and smart and right here. She'd found her. She shivered.

"I need to speak to your mother, Elizabeth," she said. But I'll be sure to buy another cup of lemonade when I'm done."

"Okay! I'd love that. It was so nice meeting you! Thank you for the donation."

"Likewise." Mary Lou smiled and walked up to the front door of the big house, cup in hand, still enjoying the sweetness of the lemonade her daughter had made for her. She had to talk to her mother, as she had planned. Tell her who she was and who Elizabeth really was. Finally, after all these years. She smiled, thinking of the task ahead.

She happily climbed the porch steps and rang the doorbell. As she waited, she looked around at where her daughter was living and marveled at it all. She then looked back toward the street and saw Elizabeth at her lemonade stand with her dog and her best friend, preparing more lemonade and welcoming a couple more neighbors with smiles and good wishes and offers to sell them the sweet drink.

The door opened, and a friendly older woman stood in the entrance.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?" the voice asked. "I see you bought some of my daughter's lemonade. Elizabeth loves doing things for others. She's a great daughter. I'm so proud of her. "

Mary Lou paused, took a deep breath, then a second deeper one, and said, "Just doing a neighborhood poll today, Ma'am. It's for the government. A census survey so we can monitor all our programs. Don't mean to bother you. I just have one question though."

"What's that? I'd be happy to help. My name is Rebecca Hughes"

"How many children do you have?"

“Just one. Elizabeth. I see you just met her and tried her wonderful lemonade. “She’s adopted. We never could have any children of our own, but we found her when she was just a baby. She was a true gift and a remarkable one I’m blessed to say. A very happy and wonderful daughter. Smart as a whip too!”

“Thank you so much for your input, Mrs. Hughes.. I’ll be sure to note it. You have a great rest of your day. “

“You too!” The door closed and Mary Lou stood on the porch silent and devastated, but wiser. She looked at Elizabeth and her dog and her best friend now even busier selling at the lemonade stand. She sighed and walked slowly back down the driveway and out to the main street, pausing to wish Elizabeth the best and buy another cup of lemonade. She had found what she needed to find. Finally. Now she could continue life as she had done for so many years, and more happily so.

It’s time I get home, “she said softly to herself as she headed for the bus depot. “Elizabeth will still be awake. She always waits up. I’ll read her a new story tonight. She’ll like that. She’ll go right to sleep. Tomorrow’s another school day. For me and for Elizabeth. She smiled.