

Unspoken Duty

by Jennifer Singleton

I was blessed to have experienced sixty-five years of life. That's longer than a lot of folks, so I really shouldn't complain. I just wish that I hadn't lived my life silenced by my need to be normal, unable to tell anyone about my ability to see strange people that others around me couldn't see. They didn't come around all the time, and for that I'm thankful. Because when they did, the memory would haunt my thoughts for years until the next inevitable encounter.

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I couldn't have been any older than four that first night. I was at home and I remember that all of the grown-ups were gathered in my grandmother's bedroom, praying and holding hands as the preacher said a few words over her. Daddy heard his mother make the death rattle earlier in the day and he and my mother had called around to tell family and friends to come on over. A rattle from a sick person meant that the end was near. Nobody was paying me any mind so I was free to do as I pleased and brought all my dolls into the living room to play. I remember sitting on the floor when my uncle JJ walked through the front door with a plate of food.

"Here you go, Sugar Bear. I bet with all the stuff going on, ain't nobody had no time to feed you." He was right, I was starving. JJ took off his hat and proceeded down the hall to the cramped back bedroom. Returning my gaze to the front door, there stood a man I'd never seen before. To my little eyes, he was the tallest man in the world. He wore dark overalls with a flannel shirt and had the biggest smile I'd ever seen a grown man have.

Something about him seemed familiar, but I also knew something was strange about him being there. I opened my mouth to call for somebody but he placed his index finger over his lips and winked playfully.

The man sat beside me and I offered him my favorite doll. He started making her dance on his knee and it made me giggle. I'm not sure how long we played, but I do remember hearing the sobs from the back room grow louder. I heard Daddy calling out his mother's name as Mama told him to let her go and that everything was going to be okay. The man stood to face the entrance to the hallway and that's when she appeared. My grandmother, her hair usually braided, now hanging loose around her shoulders, walked right into the living room as if there was nothing wrong with her. I hadn't been allowed in her room in days and I missed her so much. I got up and stretched out my arms for her to pick me up like she used to, but she didn't even look at me. All she seemed to see was this strange man who was waiting for her with extended hands. Gazing appreciatively of her, he bowed to kiss her. They couldn't stop smiling at each other while making their way to the front door.

"Bye, MaMa," was all I could say. That's what I called her. The man turned around and gave me another wink while MaMa looked at me as if she didn't know who I was. She smiled a real sweet smile anyway, puckered her lips as if she was kissing me for real and returned her loving gaze to the man.

My daddy startled me when he touched my shoulder. He looked so tired.

"Come on Mary, let's get you in the bed. We got us a long day tomorrow."

I looked back at the door but they were gone.

By the time I was a teenager I had convinced myself that the man and the vision of my dead grandmother were just a part of the overactive imagination of a child. Had I never seen something like that again, the memory would have surely faded away. But on my fifteenth birthday, as I rode my bike home, I saw a boy around my age standing in the street facing Mrs. Shepard's house, right across from mine. He had both hands in the pockets of his pants and was staring straight ahead as if nothing else was around. Curton was small and all of us older kids knew each other, so I figured this new boy must have been visiting.

"You gon' get yourself hit standing in the road like that." I stopped not too far from him and smiled. He was dressed very nicely as if on his way to church and I hoped he'd turn around and smile back.

He slowly to faced me with a blank stare, then after a moment or two returned his gaze to Mrs. Shepard's front door.

"I know you hear me. Where you from?"

He ignored me.

Embarrassed and with my defenses climbing, all I could utter was "I don't even like you, but I bet you like me." With all the attitude I could muster, I walked my bike towards my house, but looked back over my shoulder to see that his eyes were indeed following me.

Later on that night as I lay in my bed reliving the encounter for a countless time, I saw flashing lights outside and went to peer out of my window that faced the road.

The ambulance was blocking the view of Mrs. Shepard's house so I couldn't see what was taking place. But after staring at a few of the neighbors with their hands covering

their mouths and comforting one another, I was confronted by the realization that what I saw when I was four was completely real.

The strange-acting boy from earlier held Mrs. Shepard's left hand as they stepped out of the side of the ambulance and down onto the street. People were standing right there and nobody even looked at them. Mrs. Shepard was laughing and had the purse that she carried with her at all times. The boy had a smile on his face too and seemed much nicer than earlier as they crossed the street towards my house. Moments later I stood absolutely stunned as they vanished right before reaching my yard. I don't know how I managed to get to sleep that night, but after what seemed like hours of lying there frightened, I finally drifted off. I couldn't have been down for long when the hairs on my arm sensed a presence in the room. I usually slept with my back against the window, so when I opened my eyes all I saw was my wall—and the shadow it reflected. There was definitely someone behind me.

“Daddy?” I whispered. No answer.

I turned to face my fear. The mystery boy was looking down at me. One of his hands was behind his back while the other nervously fidgeted with his tie.

“If you don't leave me alone, I'll call my daddy on you.” He grinned mischievously and produced from behind his back a single yellow flower from Mrs. Shepard's vast front yard array.

The boy gently placed it on my pillow before stepping backwards to leave.

“Wait, what's your name?” I hurried out of bed and stood before him. Just moments before I had been so frightened, but his deep-set eyes lured me to reach out and touch his

cheek. It was warm just like mine, but as hard as the wooden floor beneath my feet. He blew me a kiss and turned to continue his walk into oblivion.

I held the flower up to the dull moonlight that peeked into my room to admire the most beautiful gift I'd ever received.

Up until that time, I was never the kind of person to pray on a regular basis. I went to church like everybody else and worshipped right alongside everybody else, but when I left, there was never really anything to talk to God about. Well things certainly changed for me after seeing a boy walk right through my wall. For the next few years I read the Bible one page at a time and prayed several times a day, mostly for answers as to why I had seen spirits and for them to never come around again. My prayers were answered for a long time. When my mother died from surgery complications, I was happy to have not been around. Happy that I hadn't seen her look at me as if I were a stranger while someone invisible to everyone walked her right on out of the door. I assumed that God and I had a deal. I was close with family and had a few friends from school and even held an office job at the school board. The only thing missing was a significant other.

Everybody and I mean everybody seemed to be married or at least shacking up. When people would ask why none of my boyfriends had turned to a husband, I couldn't explain how I lived with the constant worry that when and if I married, my husband would come home one day with a stranger behind him.

My thirtieth year of life rolled around very quickly. I lived on my own and had quite a nice life. But determined for me not to become an old maid, a coworker introduced me to

a man named David, a deputy sheriff in a neighboring town. He was a few years younger than me but could provide just as well as his older counterparts. We began dating and he wooed both me and my daddy who still felt that no one was good enough for his little Mary. Thanks to constant pressure from everybody involved, I was walking down the aisle less than a year later. And screaming behind two bad little boys before I knew it. I had it all. Things were finally complete in my life. David worked long hours and he would often get home after the boys and I had fallen asleep. He would creep into bed behind me, kiss the back of my neck and whisper all the ways he missed me. Never had I felt this way about anyone, and sometimes when I'd watch him sleep, I'd remind God that we had a deal.

One evening as Christopher, my oldest, and I were in the kitchen preparing dinner, I heard David call out to me. He was hours early.

“David, is everything okay?” I walked out of the kitchen into the living room and saw my husband hanging up his coat. Then another man came into view, standing awkwardly behind him like he was nervous to come all the way in. I don't remember running up to that man but Christopher later said it looked like I flew. I never quite remembered everything that happened, but I do know that I clawed at the stranger's face and beat at his chest so viciously that it took my husband and son to pull me off of him. David had never raised his hand to me, but to calm me down slapped me to the floor and only then did I realize the horror of what I'd just done. David helped the man up from his crouched position and Christopher started yelling, “What's wrong with you Mama, why you did that!” My husband glared at me with disgust and confusion as I collected myself, the

shame of it all forcing me into the bathroom where I stayed all night. My worst nightmare had come to fruition. It was of little consolation to later learn out the man was David's coworker who didn't want to soil my carpet with his dirty shoes. My apologies were endless.

To keep the peace at his job, David told everybody that I was going through some things and that I was going to see someone to "talk things through." He asked me hundreds of times why I had done it, but there was no way I could reveal the real reason. I knew that I made a mistake but figured that our love would carry us through. But apparently he was so scared that he stopped wanting to come home, afraid that I would do the same thing to him. The longer he stayed away, the angrier my boys got with me. One day I told them to go be with their daddy if they hated me so much. Christopher packed his things in an act of adolescent defiance, while six-year-old Corey stayed with me. I don't know how I got through the shame and humiliation, but eventually we all settled into a new way of life; though at times it seemed as though my life without David had no meaning at all.

Daddy called me one morning about a year after the separation saying that he was feeling a little under the weather and asked if I could make him a pot of soup. He was in his seventies and couldn't make his way around a kitchen like he used to. Corey and I showed up at the house a few hours later with soup and a few days worth of stewed chicken and cornbread.

“I’m here, Daddy!” I called as we encountered the stale stench of body odor. He must have been feeling really sick to let himself go. I started rushing through the house looking for him.

“Mama, PopPop out here!” my son called from the back door as I checked under my daddy’s bed.

I ran to the back door and saw my father making his way towards the clothes line, holding hands with a young girl who was overdressed for the hot weather we were having. She wore that smile—the one I had dreaded for years.

“Wait, Daddy!”

I caught up to them and grabbed his wrist. He looked at me and smiled. My heart stopped as I realized I couldn’t keep my grip.

“Mama where you going, there go PopPop!” Corey grabbed my hand and pointed to the back steps. There was my father, sitting comfortably in his favorite lawn chair, eyes wide open. When his favorite cup dropped from his hand and he didn’t reach to pick it up, Corey started screaming.

I wasn’t too right after that day. My father’s passing and the attack on David’s coworker proved to be too much for me. I reluctantly sent Corey to join his brother and father while I worked on getting things in my mind back in order. There was no one to talk to. I still worked and showed by face here and there to keep people from worrying about me, but the bitterness in me continued to fester. And the years continued to pass me by. I questioned the authenticity of this period of time that folks called a year, remembering how they lasted much longer when I was younger. Seemingly overnight, Christopher had

become a man and was being stationed in countries I could barely pronounce. David married an old friend of mine. After many nights of me and her arguing over the phone and in each other's front yard, we had finally gotten to a point where we could behave like ladies and exchange pleasantries in passing. And Corey, my little baby, had a baby boy of his own. I didn't sit around doing nothing with my life. I managed to keep things moving while ushering in new presidents, new laws, new neighbors and new times. I had become the neighborhood candy lady to supplement my income, tended to home improvements and entertained a few male friends on occasion; one of them even took me to Hawaii with him on one of his business trips. As far as my relationship with God, I still prayed and went to church, but there was nothing that any minister could ever preach to me that would make me understand how things our god did made any sense. And that's how I lived the rest of my life.

My last day didn't start off any differently from the thousands before it. I showered and changed and called the grandkids. I fixed my hair and went outside to water my plants. After having a light lunch, I called Mr. Fred who gave rides to the older people around town and he came to take me to run a few of my errands. He and I had a nice time. I suspected he was a little sweet on me, which coming from a young man in his forties was enough to remind me that I was still a woman.

The sun was starting to set by the time he dropped me back off. I was feeling extra tired by then as I had been for several weeks. All I wanted to do was go lie down for a nap, but that wasn't a part of my routine at all. So instead I set my bags down and headed into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

“Jesus!” I gasped, startled at the woman with a warm smile sitting at my dinner table with her arms folded.

“Get outta here! I said get outta here!” I flattened myself against the wall and closed my eyes, hoping that when I opened them again, she’d be gone. She wasn’t.

Unable to move, all I could do was gaze at this woman who, had we met anywhere else, would have received my compliments of her lovely rose dress and matching hat. It had been years since I had seen one of them face to face. Many times I’d wondered if the next one I saw would be the one coming for me. I was healthy and relatively young and always appreciated each day. I asked God right in front of her why he wanted to take me when I so clearly was not ready. Oh how I wanted to yell for help, for someone to come get me and take me somewhere I couldn’t be found. But it was my time to go and without any effort from me, acceptance replaced my fear. The woman pulled out a chair for me and patted the table to urge me to take a seat. I obliged her.

“So I guess you don’t talk either, huh?”

She reached for my hand but I jerked it away.

“After all these years, I assumed that at least one of you would open your mouth and explain something to me. Who are you? Can you at least tell me your name? Can you say anything to me? Don’t I at least deserve that?” She still said nothing. I was becoming very angry with her and the helplessness I felt.

“Well I came in here to make some coffee, so at least let me make one last cup of my damn coffee.” I went along with my business and pretended she wasn’t there, like they all

had done to me. When everything was ready, I even poured two cups. When I returned to my seat I sat her cup in front of her.

We sat for a while as I sipped my coffee and attempted to banish my visitor away with my thoughts. Out of the corner of my eye, I focused on her hands. They were so smooth, the fingers long and decorated with well-manicured nails. She wore an emerald and diamond ring on her wedding finger.

“Did you leave a husband behind?”

The woman gazed lovingly at her ring and brought the stunning stone to her lips to kiss it. I reached for her cup as she reminisced of someone whom I assumed she had left suddenly.

“Well I used to have a husband,” I sighed as I got up and made my way over to the sink. My mind organized its thoughts to tell my story, but as the hot water started to flow I began to feel lightheaded. The edge of the counter was the only thing I could grab to balance myself. That’s when she stood and stepped closer. Almost cruelly, the realization of her purpose returned to me as I noticed that her smile had vanished.

“Help me take a seat or something, don’t let me fall on the floor, please.”

She embraced me from behind and removed my grip from the counter. She wasn’t soft like a woman ought to be, but hard just like a mannequin. Hard just like that boy’s face from so long ago. Out of pure instinct I began to struggle as the adrenaline coursed through my veins. But it was no use, my strength was no match against hers and my muscles were soon forced into compliance. I emitted several groans before I could no longer form sound. I’d seen slow motion falls in the movies, but none quite mirrored the

way she and I began to drift away from my counter. It seemed as if everything was leaving me, my thoughts, my fear, my breath, even my weight.

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I'm serving duty for the first time this morning. Here to accompany a bereaved elderly husband leaning over into a beautiful mahogany casket to mourn his wife. He looks so heartbroken and weary. I'll guide him to the floor very soon. A small watery-eyed boy, his grandson, stands no taller than the man's knee. He's been studying me as I've wiggled my nose and made funny faces to relieve his stunned gaze. Since I appeared, he's been tugging at the man's pant leg, pointing at me, looking around to see if anyone else sees me. But it's all in vain; no one is paying him any mind.

THE END