

Strangers

by

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We had just finished dinner when I walked my little sister Natalie to the bathroom to help her wash her hands. She was one at the time, too young and little to do anything by herself. As her little arms extended up toward me I thought, *I can pick her up if I'm really careful*. My mother had told me to never hold her unless I was sitting down, but I thought I could do it quickly and get her washed up without anything bad happening. I reached down towards her little body, grabbed her around the waist, and slowly lifted her up to the counter. But she wiggled, and I lost my grip.

The next thing I knew she was bawling and my mom was standing in the doorway yelling at me, telling me how stupid I was. I looked up at her from where I was sitting on the floor. Her fist was tightly clenched and her eyes were glaring, something I had seen before. I felt horrible, and I knew was in real trouble.

She lunged for me, grabbing my long blonde hair, tugging me to my feet. She dragged me out into the hallway and let go, sending me to the floor. I quickly got up as she screamed at me to go to my room. I rushed past her nervously with tears streaming down my cheeks, wondering what was going to happen next. I went straight into my room, and she slammed my door behind me.

I crawled into bed, breathing deeply to get myself to stop crying, in case she came back. I hoped Natalie was going to be ok and my mom would forgive me. I was not physically hurt this time, but inside felt as though I was completely alone. Who did I have that loved me, I thought? Does she care about me when she gets so mad, or am I just a hassle for her?

I curled up in my bed that night and cried until finally I fell asleep. It was as if the world was going to end, and I decided that if it wasn't, I never wanted to talk to her again.

The next day I went to school thinking of what had happened the night before. I smiled like I always did, so no one would ask me what was wrong, because if they did I knew I would start to cry in front of everyone. We had just moved to St. Louis Park, and I'd just started school there. I would be embarrassed to cry in front of kids I had just met. We had a substitute teacher, Sarah, instead of Mrs. Whieling, our usual teacher. After lunch Sarah called every student up one by one to her desk at the front of the room. When she got to my name, I slowly walked up to her. I was curious about what she was going to make me do. She started asking me questions about life at home and what my mom and dad were like. She asked me how they treated me.

I said, "My mom hits me and kicks me and sometimes she'll pull on my hair when she's really mad." I probably made it sound a lot worse than it really was because I was still mad about what happened the night before. But either way, Sarah asked me a few more questions and wrote down what I told her on a little sheet of paper, as she'd done with all my classmates.

Later, Sarah put all of our responses on the wall outside of the classroom.

About an hour later the assistant principle of our elementary school came into the room and asked to see me. I walked over to the door where he was standing, and he told me he had been reading about our families on the wall outside the room.

"Yours caught my attention."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Will you come with me to the office?" he asked.

I had never been in the Principle's Office before and was horrified that I was in deep trouble. He pointed to an old worn down child's desk that looked as if it would collapse the second I sat down, then left for the outer office. I put my hands on my knees. The room was dark, windowless, and sparsely decorated. It smelled like cologne. I noticed a large fish tank in the corner filled with colorful swimming fish. It gurgled. I waited alone in his office for what seemed like forever.

The office door swung open and my brother, who was a third-grader, walked in and thumped down into the desk next to me. He told me that I'd gotten us both into big trouble. I panicked. I thought about running straight out the office and away from school, but before I could get away the assistant principle returned with a police officer. The officer was a big guy but looked like someone we would be able to trust. He had a kind smile and was very clean. He took both our hands and told us that he wanted to talk to us, but we would be back to school in no time at all. He led us outside to his car.

My brother and I slid into the back of the cop car, and the officer climbed in front and we pulled out of the parking lot. The car ride seemed to take forever. I sat quietly the whole time, staring out the window to see whether I recognized where he was taking us. I felt like I had done something horribly wrong, because all the people we passed stared at us with blank faces. I felt isolated, and I wondered what my mom would say when she found out what I'd done.

About an hour later, we arrived at a large brick building crowded with kids our age. Most of the kids were black and Hispanic, though there were a few white kids waiting around. I had never been in a place where I was a minority, and I felt strange, like an outsider. The policeman told us to wait in the lobby. I watched as he walked up to the counter where there

were women running all around shuffling papers and talking on phones. The chair was cold. I shivered when I sat down, the same feeling I'd had a week before while waiting in my dentist's office for a teeth-cleaning. I hated that feeling

The waiting room was so packed that people kept bumping into me and tripping over my feet. I kept my feet pulled under my chair as tightly as I could and my arms down by my side with my hands tucked under my legs. The officer pushed his way back through the crowd of people and told us he was leaving, but that my brother and I should wait where we were. I watched him walk out the door.

"I thought we were going back to school soon," I said.

My brother was glancing around and looked just as confused and nervous as I was. He pointed to one of the rooms down the hall where there was a little black boy crying. We watched as a nurse entered his room and quickly pulled out a needle. Ours eyes opened wide. She told the little boy to pull down his pants. The door shut, and seconds later we heard the little boy scream. We could hear him crying for a long time afterwards as we sat there, astonished. I hoped we wouldn't have to have the same thing done to us. I was pretty sure we would.

We waited and waited. About an hour after the officer left, two middle aged men approached us. The taller of the two was wearing holey jeans and had on tennis shoes that were covered in black mud. His hair was pulled back into a pony tail that hung longer than any guy's I'd ever seen before. The other guy was short, stubby and had a belly that hung over the waistline of his pants. He was a little cleaner, but had a suspicious smile. They introduced themselves as Fred and Larry and asked us what are names were and if we'd been waiting long. We nodded.

My brother said, “My name is Nicholas Hanson and this is my sister Rose...why?”

They said they were there to pick us up and take us to their home, where we would be staying a couple of days. My heart stopped as I thought about what it would be like staying with complete strangers. I was in shock, but kept my mouth shut and didn't say one word to anyone. I thought about how we'd been lied to. We had been told that we would be going back to school after we'd talked to the officer. I decided I was never going to trust any police officer again.

During the car ride to their house, I didn't even glance at the two guys who'd picked us up that day, though the one in the passenger seat kept asking us questions. My brother did all the talking. By the time we got to the house, the sky was dark and I could no longer see anything outside. When the car door opened I stepped out of the car. I took a couple steps towards their house, then bent down and burst into tears.

A rounded figure walked out of the house to greet us. Her voice was kind and she announced that her name was Tes. She bent down, took my hand, and led me into the house.

The house was old and decorated in orange and blue. It smelled like my grandmother's kitchen during Thanksgiving. Tes was an older woman dressed in a long plain denim skirt pulled way above her waistline. Her blouse, formerly white, was worn and stained but smelled like it had just come out of the wash. She started talking about how she had been cooking all day. I wasn't paying much attention to what she was saying, though. I felt awful being away from home, in such a strange place.

Tes led Nick and me down the stairs at the back of their house and introduced us to a little boy sitting at a miniature red table. In the basement there were crayons scattered all over the place. He was holding many crayons in his hands at the same time and coloring violently

with them all at once. He looked about the same age as me, but shook with energy.

“This is Grant, Tes explained. He is my grandson and is staying with us for a short time while his mom and dad are out on vacation in Florida.”

That night, I asked Tes if I could call my dad. I knew he wouldn't be mad at me, and could come get me if I told him where we were staying. She told me I was not allowed to use the phone while I was at their house. I didn't understand what was going on, but Tes took my hand and walked me downstairs again to the room Nick and I would be staying in. She got us some clothes to wear to sleep from wooden compartments underneath one of the beds. She said goodnight and shut the door behind her.

The room was painted dark brown and was surrounded halfway up the wall with a border that had large ducks on it. The guys living there must have liked to hunt because besides the duck print there was a real duck mounted on the wall near the door. I hated the room and wished I was asleep in my own room at home.

I felt uneasy the whole night with the ducks eyes looking directly at me, but was glad that I had Nick there with me.

“Goodnight,” I said, and waited for a reassuring response. He said nothing.

“Goodnight,” I said a little louder.

I heard no answer. I knew he was still mad at me, so I rolled over, pulled the covers over my head, and dreamed of being at home.

We spent the next five days at Tes's house. It was pretty boring, though she did cook good meals for us. For lunch every day we ate macaroni and cheese that she made from scratch, and for dinner she cooked big Thanksgiving meals with meat and potatoes and gravy. During

the day Grant was told to play with us, even though I could tell he never wanted to. He liked Connect Four, so we ended up playing that quite a bit. I asked Tes one day when we would be able to go home, but she just shrugged and told me she didn't know.

One day, while we were eating our macaroni in the kitchen, the doorbell rang. The door was right across from the kitchen, only a couple feet from us. Grant leaped up from the table and ran over to the front door to see who it was. He jumped up and down trying to see through the peep hole, which was about a foot above his head, until Tes made her way to the door. She nudged him out of the way. When she opened the door, my father was standing on the porch.

“DAD!” I screamed, jumping up from my chair, still holding the fork in my right hand.

I ran to him. My heart was pounding so fast I collapsed into his arms when he bent down to greet me. Nick came over to us to say hello, as well. My father told us we could go home now, but after we made sure we'd left everything just how we found it when we got there.

We had only been there for five days, but it had seemed like a lifetime. We ran downstairs to quickly make our beds and fold the pajamas Tes had given us while Dad stayed upstairs and talked to Tes. We thanked her for being so kind to us while we stayed with her and for all the great meals she had cooked, then booked it out the door to the car. We were so relieved to finally be with someone we knew we could trust.

That night, I called my Mom to apologize for what I had done. When she answered the phone, she sounded concerned and worried about the situation my brother and I were put through. I told her what they made us do, where we stayed, and that we were okay. I decided that I would try not to hold any of the past against her though I had told myself before that I didn't ever want to talk to her again.

We went back to her house the next week and things settled back down. But it was as if we were forbidden to talk or even think about everything that had happened. My mom never mentioned a word to me about how she felt or what needed to change.

My stomach was tied into knots for the next couple of weeks as I tried to figure out the reason behind my mother's behavior. Was she mad at me or were things actually back to normal around the house? Should I talk to her about it or just play along?

My questions were answered one night while I was lying in bed trying to fall asleep. I heard Mom crying in the next room so I went in to see what was wrong. As I stood on my tiptoes trying to pull myself into her bed she turned towards me, wiping away her tears.

“Why are you crying?” I asked.

She didn't say a word but just looked at me as if I were an angel. I scooted closer to where she sunk comfortably into the bed and just laid on her praying that she would feel better and stop crying. I could tell she just needed me to stay strong and be there for her. We could get through this together.