

A Cry for Help

A missing scene from "The Crying Child"

by Linda B.

Hutch and I had returned to the school after receiving Carol's frantic call. Carol was a teacher friend of Hutch's, and she'd asked Hutch and me for help with one of her students. We'd promised to help her, but so far, we were doing a pretty lousy job.

Spotting Guy and Vikki at the back of the classroom, we nodded a quick hello to Carol and headed over to see them. These were a couple of the sweetest, nicest kids you'd find anywhere. Vikki, with those big sorrowful eyes, was always watchful of her younger brother. And Guy, with wavy black hair hanging out from beneath his baseball cap, was a real charmer. I—no, make that *we*—couldn't wait to get our hands on whoever was beating the daylights out of Guy. No kid deserved that, least of all Guy.

Carol was obviously upset, so we instantly moved down the aisle between the desks to where Guy and Vikki were watching the fish in the small aquarium. They knew we were there, but kept their eyes straight ahead. There was an aura of sadness and rejection surrounding them. I could feel my temples start to throb and the sweat break out on my palms. Rubbing them on my jeans, I resisted the urge to throw my arms around them—to protect them—and I knew Hutch felt the same way.

So far, Guy wasn't saying much. If he'd been hurt further, would he be any more open to telling us what really happened after we'd already failed him?

Hoping a lighter approach would work this time, I pushed down my anger and teased, "Where's your pole?"

Knowing Hutch wanted to inspect Guy's back for evidence of further beating, I gave him a quick nod, and he gently lifted the back of Guy's shirt.

Suddenly, my stomach lurched, and I thought I was going to lose it right there in front of the kids. I quickly straightened up and headed out the classroom's back door. I could feel Hutch's eyes on my back, and I knew he was wondering why I'd left so abruptly. But I couldn't stop. Somewhere deep in the recesses of my mind, I vaguely remember asking that identical question to a friend a million years ago. The whole ugly incident was bubbling to the surface. I needed air. And I needed it quick.



I sprinted down the hall and out the front door of the building. The sooner I got there the better.

“Hey, where’s your pole?” I turned to look at Peter, who was sitting on the seat at the front of the metal boat, his knuckles white from hanging on so tight.

Pa, Peter, and me were in the middle of Lake Hopatchan, hoping to catch a few fish. I wondered if the fish were awake yet. It didn’t feel like I was. I couldn’t sleep all night. I don’t know if I was more excited about going fishing, or about the fact that Ma let Peter spend the night so we could get on the road early. But then when we hit the road, I fell asleep in the car almost immediately—but not Peter. He told me he’d stayed awake the whole trip, all the way to the lake in North Jersey. He said he just looked out the window as Pa drove. Said he wanted to see what Jersey looked like. I guess he’d never been outside of The City. I don’t know how he saw anything—it was pitch black out.

Pa had woken us up in the middle of the night, and Ma had said goodbye, giving Pa and me a quick hug, a kiss, and a picnic basket. Nicky suddenly let out a cry, and Ma was headed up the stairs to check on him when she turned around and quickly came back. I figured she’d forgotten to tell Pa something, but she bent down to give Peter a hug and kiss, too. He kind of stiffened and flinched; I guess he wasn’t expecting that. But when she pulled back, his face was all red, like he was embarrassed or something. He shot off a quick grin, one of the few smiles I’d ever seen on his face, and then headed toward the door.

“You guys ready to hit the road?” Pa asked. I was so excited I couldn’t stand still. Pa slapped my Yankees baseball cap on my head. “Davey, pick up the rods and tackle box and let’s get going. We want to be ready when those fish start biting. C’mon, Peter, you ready?”

Peter nodded and pulled his black cap down tighter on his head and opened the door for us.

Soon we were out sitting on the boat, the big lake all around us. Peter and me each had our own seat, and Pa sat in the middle. He was mostly helping Peter. I’d already hooked on my bait—I’d picked out the biggest, fattest worm to start with—and Pa was helping Peter with his before showing him how to wind the reel. I decided to tease Peter. What’s that phrase I’d heard our teacher, Miss Mason, say? “Like a fish outta water.” Well, that’s what Peter looked like. He sure knew how to catch a fly ball and could throw it back hard so no one was safe at home plate, but out here in the boat, in the quiet stillness of the lake, he sure didn’t look like he was comfortable. He kept grabbing onto the edge of the boat each time it started to rock a little. So to tease him, I moved a little; it didn’t take much to make the boat sway. He looked a little green around the gills so I yelled out, “The fish are gonna get away. Aren’t you ready yet?” He didn’t answer so I yelled louder, “Hey, where’s your pole?”

“You’re going to chase the fish away, Davey, if you don’t quiet down. Peter’s pole will be ready in a minute.” Pa reached out and patted Peter on the knee. “You’re doing fine, son. Davey’s just teasing you.”

We had a great morning fishing, just Pa, me, and my friend Peter. Peter had moved into the neighborhood only a few months before, and at first, he didn’t want to make friends. But when we found out what a great ballplayer he was, there was no leaving him alone until he joined our team. After that, he’d play with us almost every afternoon. Soon as his dad came home from work, he’d quickly leave, saying he had to do his homework. No matter what we said or did, we couldn’t convince him to stay any longer.

By midmorning, I'd caught four fish, but Pa made me throw two back 'cause they were too small. Peter caught three, and Pa let him keep them all. Pa rowed back to shore and we ate our picnic lunch. Ma had packed some sandwiches, fruit, and my favorite homemade cookies. Peter and me, we were just chowin' down. I guess we didn't realize how hungry we were. Pa said it had something to do with the fresh country air. I think it was because we'd been too excited to eat much breakfast.

Peter and me started messin' around. Next thing you know, we were wrestling on the ground and I had Peter pinned. All of a sudden, Peter let out this soft cry, like he was trying to hide it, and I got off him real quick and let him sit up. Pa came over immediately and asked what was wrong.

"Nothin', sir." Peter always was polite, but I could see him biting down hard on his lip and blinking quickly, like he was trying to keep the tears back. I know he said that because he didn't want to get me in trouble.

"Peter..." Pa's voice got real quiet. "...let me have a look." I wondered what Pa wanted to see.

Peter shot me a quick glance and then kept his eyes down. He turned around and Pa lifted his shirt slowly. I don't know what I expected, but it certainly wasn't the mass of black-and-blue bruises I saw there. "Pa...?"

"Shush." I understood the tone, even if it was said quietly, so I sat silently while Peter hunched over a little and Pa checked out his back. I heard him whispering in Peter's ear, but I couldn't understand what he said or what Peter answered. Peter sucked in air once or twice when Pa touched him, and I wondered if he was crying. Did Pa think I hurt him? Where could all those bruises have come from? Were we wrestling too hard?

Pa finally pulled Peter's shirt down and patted his shoulder. Pa's smile was gone, and his forehead was all wrinkled, like when he was worried. He helped Peter get up and then said, "I think it's time to go home. Let's pack up our lunch, the poles, and the fish. We've got a long drive ahead of us."

I sat, quiet as a mouse, waiting for Pa to yell at me about Peter's back—to get mad at me for hurting him—but he didn't. In fact, he acted kinda strange. He gave me an unexpected hug as we were about to get into the car. Then he got really thoughtful, not saying very much the entire trip home. Every once in a while, Pa would look at us in the rearview mirror—we were trading baseball cards—but he never said nothin'. And Peter never said nothin' about his back. It was like it never happened. So I figured it was better not to bring it up. But I couldn't forget it.

When we got home, we went into the kitchen to show Ma the fish we'd caught. She was baking bread, and the house smelled yummy. I musta been hungry again. Ma gave us all hugs. Pa whispered to her for a few minutes, his brow furrowed, his frown deepening. I'd seen that expression only a few times before—when he was really angry or upset. When he finished, he said, "C'mon, Peter, I'll walk you home."

I jumped up from my seat at the kitchen table and headed toward the door.

“If you don’t mind, Davey,” Pa said, “I’ll walk Peter home alone. You can see each other tomorrow.”

Surprised, I stopped and looked at Peter. He had his head down and he wouldn’t look me in the eye. I figured Pa was going to tell his pa what happened at the lake. I just nodded and sank back into my chair, and Ma put her arm around my shoulders. I knew I’d be in trouble when Pa got home. “Bye, Peter. See ya tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see ya tomorrow.” Peter said it softly and raised his hand a little to wave goodbye, but he wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

I didn’t see him the next day or the one after that. In fact, I never saw Peter again.



I exited through the school door and took a couple deep breaths. Spotting a picnic table off to the side, I headed over to it and sat down on top, legs extended. I leaned back against the brick wall, glad for the support it offered. I don’t know where the memory of Peter and our fishing trip came from, except that the bruises on Guy’s back closely matched those of Peter’s that day long ago. Looking back on it now, there was no doubt in my mind that Peter’s father had been responsible for all those bruises. And that explained why Pa never said anything more about it that day or any other. He’d come home, an angry look in his eyes, but the anger wasn’t directed at me. In fact, he tucked me into bed that night, something Ma usually did.

Ma had told me about a week later that Peter’s family had moved. I missed him for a while, but as time went by, I quit wondering where he was. I’d never really given that day a second thought until now. I realized that when Pa took Peter home that night, he’d probably had it out with his father. Pa was a cop; maybe he reported him. Maybe Pa physically hurt him so he’d know what it felt like to hurt another human being, a helpless child, at that. I never thought Pa would hurt anyone, unless it was in the line of duty. He certainly never hurt Nick or me. But, in his anger, did he hurt Peter’s father? There was no doubt in my mind he deserved it.

No doubt that’s why Peter and his family had left so suddenly. I wondered where Peter was now and what had happened to him.

I hadn’t heard a sound, but I felt his presence. Hutch sat down on the picnic table bench, briefly touching my foot. He’d come looking for me—to be sure I was all right.

I was at a loss for words. I didn’t even know where to begin. I thought I’d seen everything, but none of it compares to hurting a defenseless child, not even the murderers, the rapists, and the junkies we deal with every day. Whoever did this to Guy, to Peter, was a sicko. Who could hurt a child that way? It didn’t make any sense.

For once in this job I felt helpless. How would we ever be able to help Guy? To protect him?

“I thought I’d seen everything. Ya know?”

“Yeah,” Hutch replied, obviously disheartened.

I leaned forward, rubbing my hand across my face, hoping the pressure might erase my headache. “I guess through all the years, you get used to all the killings and the murders and the rapes and the junkies and— But this?” I took a breath in disbelief. “Nothing compares to this...nothing compares to this kind of—”

“I know, Starsk, I know. I got eyes.”

I really struggled to understand. “What’s worse—did you see that kid? Seems like it doesn’t even bother him. It’s almost as if he accepts it.”

“Carol’s got a theory on that. The kid thinks it’s normal. He doesn’t like what’s happening to him, but it’s all he’s ever known. Now, you figure that one out.”

“We got a lot to learn.” I looked at Hutch and knew he was as baffled by it all as I was. I’d come from a truly loving family and so did Hutch. Even though his parents weren’t the “huggy” type like mine, he’d never really doubted their love for him. They just didn’t show it like mine did. We both knew our parents would never have intentionally hurt us.

While we’re both struggling with trying to understand how anyone could do this to Guy, or any other human being, we’ve heard his cry for help. I’ve no doubt we’ll find out who’s doing this to him. I just hope it’s before he becomes another Peter.

We slowly rose from the picnic table and headed back into the school.



Please send comments to [Linda B.](#)