

Once In a Lifetime

By the Blintz

I look around the dirty little room one more time and cross to the bed, the loud click of the latch on my only suitcase echoing in the silence. I have spent many long, lonely hours here either sitting by the window and staring at nothing, or trying to earn a buck the only way I know how. Mostly, I have nothing but bad memories of this place – the endless parade of men trailing in and out of my door, the noise, the cigarette smoke, and the fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of the dark, and fear of myself.

But all that's behind me now and I look through the small bureau one last time as I get ready to leave. My searching hand brushes against a stiff piece of paper in the back of one of the drawers and I bring it out, curiosity getting the better of me. It's a business card, the letters all but faded from view, but that doesn't matter. I've stared at this card so many times that all of the writing could be completely wiped off and I'd still know what it says. I sit down in my favorite chair, the familiar red glow from the neon sign illuminating the surface of the card, and I don't even try to stop the memories as they come flooding back. It seems like such a long time ago...

No little girl dreams of being a prostitute when she grows up. At least I didn't. It just sort of happened, I guess. Yeah, I made a few bad choices – dropped out of school when I was fifteen thinking I was grown, got hooked up with a guy who insisted we come to California and see the world. He made it sound so glamorous. How was I to know that by the time we made it here he would be tired of me and leave me stranded at the bus station? I was hungry, scared, tired and completely alone for the first time in my life and I wondered what on earth I was going to do. Going back home was not an option. My mother drank herself into oblivion every day while my stepfather made me go to bed early so he could 'tuck me in'. Mom was always so drunk she never realized he'd be in that room with me for hours every night doing whatever made him happy. And I couldn't do a damn thing about it. The one time I did try to tell my mother what was going on she slapped me across the face and told me to stop telling lies. The very next day I left for California, and I'd die before I ever went crawling back to them.

I wandered around the station trying not to panic and ended up outside, standing at the corner of the building. It wasn't very long before some guy came up to me and asked if I wanted to go to his room with him. I had no better offers so I went along. I can honestly say I didn't know what he had in mind, but when I woke up a few hours later and found a twenty-dollar bill on the nightstand, I figured it out. It really hurt me at first to think of what I had become, but, as time wore on, even the shame went away. I left that hotel room and took up my post by the bus station and, by the end of that first day, I had a hundred dollars in my pocket. But what a price I paid.

A couple of years later I found the perfect set up in a little room by the amusement park. All the model daddies would bring the wife and kiddies to the park, give them a wad of cash, and tell them to go have a good time while he took care of 'business'. I was that business. Sometimes a trick would actually look out the window of my room and spot his family at the park while he was makin' time with me. It seemed to make them enjoy the experience even more. But, why should I care? As long as they gave me the money I asked for, they could do pretty much whatever they wanted.

It was while I was working near the amusement park that I met Roy. He was from Tucson and someone had given him my name. For some reason, he took a liking to me, probably because I didn't mind most of the weird stuff he seemed to enjoy the most. Hey, a buck is a buck and I was way past worrying about how I earned it. But then the beatings started. Roy Slater had a mean streak in him and he got really turned on by hurting me. I tried to break off our 'relationship' a few times, but he just threatened me. And I knew more than most just how mean he could be. So I put up with the abuse because I wanted to live. Pretty simple.

I remember the last time I saw him. It had been a while since he'd been in town. The old amusement park had long since closed and I had gotten a room above a pool hall. Old Jimmy, the bartender, would hint around to the customers and send up anyone that was interested in a little entertainment. In return, I paid him rent for the room and gave him a little finder's fee every week from whatever money I made off our arrangement. It worked out pretty well for both of us. I was making a living doing the only thing I knew and Jimmy kinda watched out for me. Then one night, Roy showed up.

He barged into my room unannounced, reeking of alcohol and stale sweat. He was in a really good mood – said he'd come into a lot of extra money taking care of someone's little problem. The longer he stayed in the room with me, the drunker he got, and pretty soon he was bragging about some cop he'd wasted. It sent chills up and down my spine to know that he had killed someone. I guess it made him feel powerful and macho 'cause he laid some extra bills on the table, grabbed my hand, and proceeded to twist it as hard as he could. I heard a couple of cracking sounds and tears sprang to my eyes, but I was afraid to try to break away. I honestly thought I was going to die at his hands in that room.

Well, as it turned out, he said he couldn't stay very long 'cause he had some other business to attend to, so he picked me up, threw me on the bed, and got his money's worth. He left me with the promise that he'd be back soon, and I stood at the window and watched him get into his car and drive off. My legs gave out on me and I sat down heavily in a chair by the window. I don't know how long I sat there, staring into space while the red neon 'BILLIARDS' sign blinked on and off, but eventually I had to get up and go back to work. A steady stream of customers started coming through my door but during every break in the traffic, I'd find myself sitting at the table, staring out the window, terrified that he was going to come back.

I had just lit a cigarette and resumed my pointless staring when the door opened yet again. I didn't even bother looking up. It didn't matter to me what the guy looked like anyhow, he was just a fast twenty. "Business must be good downstairs," I said tiredly, still not turning my head to look his way.

"You Carla?" I heard a man's voice ask me.

Like he really cared what my name was. Give me a break! "Put your twenty dollars here on the table where I can see it – you haven't got all night." I wanted to say 'Let's get this over with', but I learned a long time ago not to say everything I was thinking.

I heard the door close and footsteps cross the room, then something came into my line of sight, but it wasn't the twenty-dollar bill I'd been expecting. It was a badge.

Great! Just what I needed on a day like that one. Some over-eager, macho cop comin' in here to bust me or worse, wanting to 'trade' favors. I'd done it before – given a cop a little freebie from time to time so he wouldn't arrest me. I sighed wearily and leaned forward, stubbing out my cigarette and pulling my feet down off the chair they'd been propped on. "Whatta ya want, cop?" I asked in the toughest voice I could muster.

Nothing could have prepared me for his reply. "Roy Slater." His voice was flat and emotionless.

That got my attention, and I looked up at him for the first time. I have to admit that I was distracted for a few moments as I stared at the man who stood before me. He was positively gorgeous, with dark curly hair and a body to die for. For just a minute I found myself actually hoping that he was here to trade out a favor or two with me, but then I got a look at his eyes. Deep, cobalt blue with long dark lashes, they stared into my soul with an intensity I hadn't seen in a long time. I felt naked to his scrutiny and I involuntarily pulled the neckline of my robe a little closer together.

But even for this beautiful cop I knew I had to play dumb when he mentioned Roy's name. So, I averted my gaze and kept my mouth shut.

"Roy Slater?" He asked again, with a little more force. There was a brief moment of silence and he spoke again. "It's important."

He never raised his voice, but it was that calm, expressionless detachment that let me know he meant business. For the next several minutes he asked me questions and I tried to dance around the answers and not give him any information. After all, Roy knew where to find me and I knew he would kill me without a second's hesitation if he thought I had given him up to the cops. I firmly decided that I would not talk, no matter what, and tried to ignore the persistent presence now seated in front of me.

I was doing really well, as long as I didn't look into those eyes, and didn't give him one crumb of information, even when he noticed the bruises on my hand and asked me how

it happened. I wanted to blurt out the entire sordid story and beg him to take me away from Roy and this seedy little room and the desperate person I had become, but again, self-preservation took over. I kept to myself and was convinced I had won this little battle of wills, and I would live to see another sunrise.

But then he scooted to within a few inches of my face and I found myself drawn back to his eyes. I expected to see the same probing scrutiny I had met before, but instead I saw something else. Fear. There, staring out at me from the face of a seasoned, self-assured cop was the same kind of haunting fear that I saw in my own eyes every morning when I was forced to face the mirror. This time I couldn't tear my eyes away from his gaze as he continued to speak to me in a voice that was almost a whisper.

“You know, someone very, very, very close to me might be dead – because of your friend.” He paused for a moment and I watched in disbelief as he struggled to control his emotions. I think he really wanted to reach out and strangle the truth out of me, but something held him back as instead, he continued to talk. “And I got no way of knowin’ unless I can find him and I can ask him.”

He stopped speaking for a few moments and broke eye contact with me. His eyes were very bright and he was blinking rapidly as he again brought himself under control. Now, if he had barged into my room, threatening me and yelling and screaming, I would not have been impressed. I've seen just about every type of intimidation known to mankind and I'm just about immune. But there was no way I could be immune to the raw emotion on that man's face. This person he was talking about – the one that was 'very, very, very close' to him - had to be really important. Any fool could see that. And for some reason, even though I thought it was impossible, he touched something deep inside of me that I thought was dead. I'd forgotten that there were decent human beings out there that built relationships and really cared about one another. For just a moment I was actually jealous, for I knew that even if his friend was dead, he was loved. Love was something I had done without most of my life and I couldn't deny the force of it sitting there in front of me.

Even before he promised me the chance to never see Roy again, I knew I would tell him what he wanted to know. Yeah, I was still scared, but I was compelled beyond all reason to help that cop find his friend. I guess I just wanted to know that for once in my life I had done something to make a difference.

I told the cop he could find Roy at the Hotel Garvy. “Good,” he said quietly. He held eye contact with me for a few lingering seconds, and then he was gone.



It was just a short time later that I heard through the grapevine that Roy Slater was dead. The cop had somehow kept his promise and I couldn't help but wonder if he had managed to find his friend. For some reason I felt like I'd been given another chance, almost as if I were 15 again and was standing in the bus station on the verge of a whole

new life. Somehow, in that one brief encounter, that cop had given me back my dignity by allowing me the chance to do the right thing. To look inside myself and find enough decency to help another person, even if it meant putting myself in danger. I can't tell you just how much that boosted my self-esteem and, while I still hadn't changed what I was, at least I was thinking there were options for me.

I decided there was no time like the present so I got dressed and headed down to the local hospital to have my hand looked at. I know it was a baby step, but it was a step – never before in my life had I done anything to take care of myself. I felt strangely free for the first time in years and it was refreshing to have something to look forward to other than 'No Cover Night' at the billiard hall.

I signed in and was told to have a seat – someone would be with me shortly. The ER looked to be pretty busy, and the dragon lady behind the receptionist's desk had given me quite a look when I signed in, so I figured I was in for a wait. But that was okay. I had nothing else to do.

I had been there for what seemed like hours when the glass doors from the ambulance dock swung open and a crew of paramedics, rescue workers and cops came sweeping in, pushing a man on a stretcher. His leg was in some sort of splint and he was lying very, very still. By all appearances I guessed that he was unconscious and, judging from the lack of color in his face, he was almost dead. I noticed that someone was holding his hand in a vise-like grip but I couldn't see who it was because of all the people that were pressed in around them. They came around the corner and headed into the large trauma room that was right across from my chair. The double doors swung closed behind them and I was left to wait for dragon lady to call my name.

I was finally ushered into a small curtained cubicle and eventually a young intern came in and examined my hand. After another hour, during which x-rays were taken and read, I was told that I had a fractured bone in my hand. The same young intern came in and splinted it for me, advising me to follow up with an orthopedist in a couple of days when the swelling went down. He said it like he really didn't believe I'd do it and treated me like I had some strange, highly contagious disease. Normally, I wouldn't let something like that bother me, but ever since that cop showed up, my life had become anything but normal and I resented that intern for looking down on me. When the nurse came in to discharge me, I snatched the paperwork out of her hand and scurried from that room with as much dignity as I could muster. On my way out of there, I cursed myself and that cop for making me think I could ever be something I wasn't.

Just before I made it out to the parking lot, I happened to glance to my right and saw a familiar head of dark curly hair. It was that cop, but if I hadn't seen his hair first, I doubt that I would have recognized him. He was sitting all hunched in on himself in one of the hard plastic chairs along the wall, and the calm, self-assurance I had admired so much was completely gone. Here he was just another anxious friend waiting impatiently for news of his loved one.

He must have sensed me staring at him because at that moment he looked up and our eyes met once again. I was shocked at how much his appearance had changed in the short time that had passed. He was pale and haggard and looked totally exhausted, dark rings around his bloodshot eyes telling a story of too little sleep and too much worry. I cradled my hand self-consciously and looked away, but it was too late. He stood up to greet me, even though I could see that even that simple act took every ounce of energy he could muster.

“How’s your hand?” he asked, moving closer to me and reaching out tentatively to gently touch the splint on my arm.

“It’s fine,” I replied, nervously tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Fractured one of the bones, but it’s no big deal.”

“Good,” he replied distractedly, his eyes constantly wandering back to stare at the double doors to the trauma room.

“Did you find your friend?” I knew it was none of my business, but I had to know. That cop was solely responsible for freeing me from Roy Slater forever and I felt an odd responsibility toward him and that someone who was “very, very, very close” to him.

“Yeah,” he replied tiredly, the corners of his mouth twitching into what I thought was supposed to be a grin. It didn’t quite come out that way and seemed to be more of a grimace. “I’m just waiting to see what the doctor....”

Just then the doors to the trauma room opened and an older, dark-haired doctor dressed in traditional green scrubs came out, his eyes scanning the waiting room.

“Hold on just a minute...” The cop squeezed my arm briefly then headed over to talk with the doctor.

I know I should have left, but again I felt the urge to stay and see if his friend was going to be okay. I couldn’t hear a word the doctor was saying so I waited patiently, wondering if the cop would let me in on what was going on. The two men talked for several minutes and I saw the cop reach out and shake the doctor’s hand before he turned and headed back toward me.

One look at his face and I knew I didn’t need to hear what the doctor had said. That same cop who moments ago had been on the brink of exhaustion had a new spring in his step and a smile on his face that lit up the entire waiting room. He was positively exuberant and I knew without asking that his friend was going to be okay. I couldn’t help but smile in response to his happiness as he came up beside me and engulfed me in a huge hug.

“He’s gonna be okay. He’s gonna make it.” His smile seemed to grow bigger and brighter with every word. He finally released me and self-consciously cleared his throat. “Sorry. I get a little carried away sometimes.”

“He must be pretty special, this friend of yours.”

He gave me a rather odd look as he nodded his agreement, almost as if he was surprised that I didn’t already know just how special his friend was.

“You could say that,” he replied, still unable to wipe the relieved smile off his face.

We stood there for a few more minutes, him smiling and me staring at the floor, the walls and the ceiling. The longer I stood there the more uncomfortable I felt, like I didn’t belong. A deep sadness crept over me as I realized that my part in the life of that cop and his friend was over and it was time for me to go back to reality.

“Well,” I said, releasing a heavy sigh. “I guess I’d better get back. Gonna need some extra cash to pay for this busted hand. And you probably want to go see your friend.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I really should go to him now. He’s had a rough couple of days and could probably use the company.” He looked at me again the way he had back in my room the first time I had met him, his eyes piercing into my very soul. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah,” I replied with a heartiness I surely didn’t feel. “I’ll be just fine. A girl like me knows how to take care of herself.”

He smiled at me again and reached into his back pocket to pull out a business card. As he scribbled something on the back of it he explained. “Look. If you ever decide to change professions, I have a friend who owns a restaurant and I’m positive he’d give you a job. His name’s Huggy Bear and here’s his number. Just tell him Starsky and Hutch sent ya and he’ll take care of you.” He handed me the card, his fingers lingering on my hand. “You ever need anything, anything at all, you call the ninth precinct and ask for me. My name’s Starsky. Dave Starsky. You got that?”

I nodded my head and turned to leave. “I got it.”

I took a few steps toward the door and turned for one last look at Starsky. He was already bounding through the doors of the trauma room in search of his friend. I felt a sharp stab of jealousy toward that friend of his and then realized how ridiculous that seemed. After all, I’d never even met the man. But I wondered what it would be like to have someone care about me that much. And I knew deep inside that I would never have that for myself.

I headed down the street toward my dingy little room and my dirty little job. I passed a trashcan on the sidewalk and pulled the business card out of my pocket. That cop and I

both knew I would never change professions, and I would never call him. That just wasn't in the cards for a girl like me. I thought about tossing the thing away, but something held me back. Kinda crazy maybe, but I just couldn't give it up. So instead, I shoved it back into my pocket and headed on home...

I sigh deeply as I stare at the well-worn card in my hand. I never did call that number or ever see that cop again, but many times I've pulled that card from its resting place in the drawer to remind myself that I am a human being and, once in my life, I did make a difference. To some, that may seem trivial, but for me, it is a lifeline.

I stand up and gather my suitcase and sweater, once again tucking that card into my pocket. I don't know what the future holds or what will become of me, but that card will stay with me. I take one long look around the room as I pass through the doorway for the last time. I shut the door gently, the clicking of the latch the last sound I hear as I head into the unknown.



The End