

Bliss

Liz sat on the couch in her neighbor's house patiently waiting for Janice to return. She sipped her hot cocoa and kicked her feet back and forth as they hung casually off the couch. Under one arm she held Muffin, her stuffed animal made to resemble a border collie dog. Liz had never been in Janice's apartment even though they had been neighbors as long as Liz could remember. It was different than she imagined it in her daydreams. Pictures hung from the walls and Liz saw one that looked like Janice but in a camouflage uniform and with her hair up in a tight bun and Liz remembered that Janice told her she had been in the army a long time ago. Liz smiled at the memory of when Janice had told her that since she put emphasis on the word long as she tilted her head back and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

As she sat on the couch looking at the photos, Liz started to see red and blue lights reflecting off the picture frames. She placed Muffin carefully on the couch as she stood up and placed her cup of cocoa on the table. The cup reminded Liz that she still had not given her father the coffee cup she bought him for his birthday. The thought faded as the apartment door opened. Janice, her sun-kissed neighbor in knee high boots and a large hoodie walked in accompanied by a policeman.

"This is Officer Jones," Janice explained, gesturing toward the policeman. Officer Jones took a step toward Liz and kneeled down so he was eye level with her.

The officer smiled. "I've got a little girl at home that's about your age. Even has blond, curly hair and blue eyes just like you," he said.

"She does? My dad says blond is the color of angel's hair!" Liz proudly exclaimed. The officer looked at Janice and their eyes briefly locked gaze before he looked at Liz again.

“That’s right,” he said, “her name is Jesse, what’s yours?” he asked. Liz put her hands on her hips and nodded her head with each word.

“It’s Bliss.” Her smile showed two missing front teeth.

“That’s some name,” the officer replied.

“It’s Liz,” Janice interjected, “Bliss is how she pronounces it. It’s become a nickname of sorts.” The officer chuckled a humph through his nose and smiled.

“Well Bliss...can you tell me about your day?”

Liz woke up to the sound of birds chirping outside and sunlight gliding in between the white curtains hanging over her windows. She stretched her arms out above her head, let out a fierce yawn, then swung herself around so that her legs hung off the bed as she looked around her room.

“It’s not much,” her father would tell her, “But it’s our little U.P. paradise.”

She lived in the small two-bedroom apartment with her father for as long as she could remember. Stuffed animals were strewn about the floor and a drawing of a unicorn Liz was particularly proud of hung on the wall with a thumb tac. Sliding carefully off the bed, Liz navigated through the stuffed animals toward her dresser and pulled out the dress her father bought for her. She didn’t like wearing dresses, but her father always told her she reminded him of her mother when she wore them. Liz was indifferent. She was always told that mommy left for a better place the day she was born. That was okay with Liz because she shared a birthday with her father and thought they did okay without a mommy. Liz shuffled her feet excitedly and smiled into her dress. Today *was* her fourth birthday and her father’s...well, Liz wasn’t sure how old he was.

After getting dressed, Liz snuck down the hall from her bedroom to her father's room on the other side and peeked through the door which had been left slightly open, but she didn't see him lying on his bed. It was not an uncommon sight. Her father regularly fell asleep watching television in the living room after drinking his adult sodas. She walked down the hall into the living room not bothering to tip toe as she had earlier. Liz knew her footsteps wouldn't wake her father up on the couch and, as she rounded the corner into the living room, Liz saw two feet with socks on them resting on the arm of the couch, a tale tell sign that she had been right.

"Time for breakfast," Liz thought while walking into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and looked inside. A half-gallon of milk and a carton of eggs were the only noteworthy items besides what her father called adult sodas, a twenty-four pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Liz knew her father liked scrambled eggs, but she didn't know how to make them, and Daddy would be upset if she used the stove. He would have to settle for cereal for his breakfast in bed. Liz grabbed the milk and shut the refrigerator door. Then, she walked over to the dishwasher, set down the milk, opened the door and pulled out two cereal bowls and two spoons. She arranged the bowls on the kitchen floor and placed a spoon and poured milk in both. With only the cereal left, Liz grabbed the Trix from the pantry and poured it into the bowls until each was overflowing, leaving a mess of milk and cereal on the floor.

When Liz was done with the ritual breakfast in bed preparation, she walked the bowls over to the kitchen spilling some here and there along the way. There was no room to set the bowls on the table, so Liz set them carefully on the floor underneath. She turned to her father who lay face up on the couch, arms folded across his chest.

"Time to wake up Daddy!" Liz exclaimed. Her father didn't budge. She reached out and grabbed his shoulder moving it back and forth before accepting the silent defeat. Her father was

always very tired after working and especially after drinking adult sodas. From what Liz could gather he had drunk quite a few last night.

“Oh well,” Liz thought, “he would wake up eventually. She sat down and made quick work of her cereal. The real staple of a birthday was at the end of the day when a person got to open their present, so Liz looked forward to seeing her father’s face when she gave him his. Now that she thought about it, Liz had not gotten her father anything yet and that gave her an idea. She would walk down to the corner store and get him a gift. With this plan in mind, Liz grabbed her stuffed animal, Muffin, and walked out the door.

No sooner had Liz shut the door to her apartment she was greeted by Janice. From what she could tell, Janice had just gotten home and still had her key in the door lock.

“How’s the birthday girl doing?” asked Janice.

“It’s pretty good, but Daddy’s still sleeping,” Liz replied. The sound of disappointment was subtle, but Janice was able to pick it up. She knew Liz’s dad could put away a case all by himself and did so frequently on his days off. She assumed this was the reason he was still asleep.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll come around and when he does, you’ll have the best birthday ever,” Janice assured Liz. That comment made Liz smile. “Okay, I have to get these groceries inside before they go bad. Maybe I’ll see you later,” she said. Liz just smiled and waved in response. When Janice was inside her apartment Liz set out to get her dad his birthday present.

The short walk to the store was cold and uneventful. The occasional car drove by which caused a cold rush of wind to blow, giving Liz the chills and sending leaves that had gathered on the side of the road cascading through the air. Liz now stood in an aisle of the small store that had an array of household items. She had walked up and down the aisles looking for a gift until a

coffee cup caught her eye. There were words written on it, but Liz did not know what they said. The only word she recognized was “dad”. She grabbed the cup from the shelf and walked out of the store, oblivious to the misdeed she had committed. The walk back to her house was the same as when she had come to the store with the exception that it was later in the day, and it had begun to get dark early due to the cloud cover that had formed overhead. As Liz neared her apartment, she saw Janice standing outside smoking a cigarette. Liz was happy to see her neighbor but when Janice saw Liz coming up the walkway her eyes got wide.

“Where’s your dad Liz?” Janice inquired, “Why are you out here by yourself?”

“I needed to get Daddy his birthday present,” Liz replied. She held the coffee cup and shook it like a trophy she had just won. As she got closer, Janice put out her cigarette and exhaled the smoke from the last drag. She kneeled down and had a serious look on her face, but she didn’t speak until Liz stopped a few feet away.

“It’s not safe out here for a little girl like you Liz.” Janice’s voice was stern. “Your father is probably worried sick about you,” she chastised.

“I’m sorry,” Liz apologized. Her head hung low, and she looked at the ground.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” Janice said. “Is that your dad’s birthday present?” she asked. Liz nodded her head in reply. “It’s a thoughtful gift. Why don’t you head inside and give it to him?” Liz responded with another nod of her head but this time she smiled through pursed lips. Janice stood up, opened her apartment door, and, with a wave of one hand and a smile she went inside. With the conversation over, Liz walked to her apartment door and grabbed the handle. She imagined her father’s smiling face as he received his gift, then turned the handle and went inside.

The scene inside the apartment was just as Liz had left it with the exception that it was darker now. Liz walked over to the couch and saw her father was still asleep.

“Daddy,” she said quietly. Her father didn’t move. “Daddy,” she spoke more firmly and pulled on his shirt sleeve. Liz sighed when she realized it was no use. She placed the coffee cup on the only space available on the coffee table and climbed up so that she was sitting on top of her father with one leg on either side. She wondered how long it would be until he woke up and laid her head down to rest on his chest. “When he does wake up,” Liz thought, “he’ll see I’m wearing my dress and his present on the table.” Now that Liz was sitting still, she began to feel the strain of her day weighing on her. Her eyes began to get heavy, and she fought to keep them open but relented when she felt the weightlessness of sleep and drifted off.

Liz did not know how long she had been asleep when she heard the knocking on the door but when she lifted her head up from her father’s chest, she saw that the door was cracked slightly, allowing a cold draft to blow through the living room.

“Hello?” Liz inquired, “Who is it?”

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and the face of Liz’s neighbor, Janice appeared in the doorway as it pushed slightly more open.

“I didn’t scare you, did I?” asked Janice. “I’m sorry for just barging in but I wanted to return Muffin to Liz so she wouldn’t be out in the cold all night.” Liz hopped off her father excitedly and ran over to Janice. She grabbed Muffin and hugged her tightly with her eyes squeezed shut. When she opened her eyes, she looked up at Janice to thank her for returning the stuffed animal, but she was still looking at the couch.

“Liz, has your father been sleeping all day?” Janice asked. Her voice was laced with caution.

“He must be really tired from his job. I didn’t get to show him his birthday present yet, but I know he’s going to love it,” replied Liz with a smile on her face. Janice looked at the coffee table where Liz pointed. It was riddled with what must have been an entire case of Pabst Blue Ribbon and, on the edge and only space available on the table, sat a coffee cup that Liz had bought from the store. It read “World’s best dad”. She walked slowly toward the coffee table and turned to look down at Liz’s father. He looked as if he were in a peaceful slumber, but his face wore a pale, blue hue. Janice turned to look at Liz and smiled, willing the tears welling up in her eyes not to roll down her cheeks.

“Would you like to come have hot cocoa at my house while we wait for your dad to wake up?” she asked.

“Would I?” was her reply and the pair left the apartment.