

Competition: The Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize 2020

Title of Story: Little Hero

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Little Hero
by J.F. Nicks

Justin celebrated his fifth birthday with his mum, Lisa. They walked along the Barrack Street Jetty at Elizabeth Quay, holding hands.

His sneakers were bright white. Lisa had bought them for him at the Salvos store on Barrack Street earlier that day, as a gift.

“How are they?” she asked him.

“I love them. Thanks.”

She pulled out a Twix from her pocket. Justin smiled. He ate half of it, and then offered the other half to his mum.

“No,” she said. “It’s all for you this time.”

“Thanks.”

His mum squatted down beside him, and kissed his forehead. “I love you, Justin.”

“I love you, too, mum.”

They hugged one another.

#

When it began to rain, she wound up the window of their old Falcon sedan, leaving only a small gap for ventilation. The rain came down hard on the roof, stirring Justin out of a deep sleep.

“Mum?”

“Shh,” she whispered. “It’s okay.”

He felt so tired that he could scarcely keep his eyes open. Then, using the crook of his arm as a pillow, he nodded off again.

The rain came and went during the night. They slept in one another's arms, on the back seat of the car, in the empty parking lot behind the Supercheap Auto store in East Victoria Park.

At one point during the night Lisa woke up, pained. She'd sat up, not able to breathe properly.

Aside from the bright lights of the twenty-four-hour McDonald's store opposite them, she'd seen nothing much else at all out there.

By sunup, Justin woke up.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked him.

"Good," he said.

"I'm glad."

They headed across the street to the McDonald's to use the public restrooms.

#

He kneeled down beside his mum's feet inside the Chapman Road Laundromat, in Bentley.

The clothes dryers tumbled, dampening the air.

"Are you okay, Justin?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Okay," she said, sitting back against the front window of the shop, on a bench. The sunlight lit them both.

A woman, carrying a laundry basket of clothes, and wearing a burka, entered the premises. She loaded a washing machine with more of the same black burka's, and then she left.

Justin, meanwhile, played with his Matchbox toy car, the one with the missing wheel, around and beneath the bench. He then spied, much to his surprise, a five-cent coin, partially hidden beneath one of the clothes dryers, under some lint and bubblegum wrappers.

He went over there, grabbed the coin, and held it up. "Look, mum!" he said.

"What is it, Justin?" She stopped biting her fingernails to regard him from across the shop, realising what it was. "It's for you."

"For me?"

"Yeah," she said. "For you."

Grinning, he pocketed it. "Thanks."

#

"I had a dream about dad last night," Justin said.

"Oh?"

He wound the car window down a bit to let in some fresh air. His hair was all messy now. Lisa turned the radio off. She indicated and turned the car left onto McMillan Street, with the tailpipe rattling and blowing black smoke.

"What was the dream about?"

Justin shrugged, trying – but unable – to look over the dashboard. "I can't remember, mum."

"That's okay."

She pulled into a narrow laneway, and, having to manoeuvre the car around green rubbish bins, parked cars, and other obstacles, found an empty car bay closest to the rear of the bank, by the steps.

#

“I’m sorry,” the man said to Lisa, “but there’s really nothing I can do for you.”

“Okay, then.”

They left the Commonwealth Bank on Albany Highway by the side entrance, from where they’d come. Lisa hadn’t an idea – now that all of their savings were gone – as to how she would support themselves anymore.

Justin tugged at her shirt, and then said, “He wasn’t a very nice man, mum.”

“No,” she agreed. “He really wasn’t, was he?”

“No.”

#

At Kings Park, they sat opposite the State War Memorial on the steps, sharing the last can of SPC peaches together in the bright sunlight.

“Do you want to live in the country?” she asked him, handing the very last peach to him.

“I don’t know. Will you come, too?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Where?”

“Northam.”

“Where’s Northam, mum?”

“In the country, where I was born.”

“Okay.”

His mum smiled and kissed her son's forehead. She held him tightly, closing her eyes.

"You could go to school there," she said, opening them.

"School?"

"Yeah. You could make friends. Would you like that?"

"Why... why would I when... when I have you, mum?"

#

She watched him scale the kids' plastic slide to the top platform. "Be careful, Justin," she called out from below, standing under the shade of a gum tree.

"I will." He turned himself around, sat, and slid down the slide, smiling. "Weee! Again!"

While attempting to swing across the monkey bars, Justin got something in his eye. His mum helped him down, kneeled down in front of him, and carefully removed an eyelash from his eye.

"Make a wish," she said, holding the eyelash on the pad of her finger, "and then blow it away."

"What kind of a wish?"

"Any kind."

"Okay."

Closing his eyes, he made a wish, opened them, smiled, and then blew his eyelash away with one long breath.

#

“Lord!”

Justin tripped over the kerb, but his mum righted him just in time.

“What is it, mum?”

As they neared their parked car in the Wadjuk parking lot, he could see what his mum had seen. Someone had broken the driver’s side window while Lisa and Justin were still at the children’s playground, playing. Small nuggets of glass covered the seat, floor and centre console.

“Oh, Lord,” she said.

“What are we going to do?”

She began to clean the glass up. “It’ll be all right, I think.”

“Let me help you,” Justin said.

“Nuh-uh,” she said, “you’ll hurt yourself.”

“I don’t want to get hurt,” Justin agreed, nodding.

“No, you wouldn’t.”

#

Lisa couldn’t sleep at all. The broken window frightened her, but she sat guard in the driver’s seat all the same. In the back, Justin tossed and turned beneath a thin bedsheet. He also had trouble sleeping.

“I have to go to the toilet,” he said.

“Okay.”

She led him out into the dark, under one of the many banksia trees scattered around Kings Park, where he would have some privacy to do his business.

“Do you have to go, too, mum?”

“No,” she said. “I’ve already been.”

“Okay.”

#

With what little cash she had on herself, she purchased some fuel for the car at the Caltex in Rivervale. It would be enough to get them to Northam and then back again to the city, if necessary.

Justin sat in the passenger’s seat, playing with his toy car, as Lisa drove east along Great Eastern Highway, worrying if whether her car would make it up Greenmount Hill in one piece, without overheating or stalling.

“I’d like a dog,” Justin said, squinting in the sunlight. “One day.”

“What kind of a dog?”

“A small dog.”

“Like a puppy dog?”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “A small puppy dog. Yeah.”

#

A few minutes later, while driving somewhere in the Perth suburb of Ascot, Lisa saw, in the rear-view mirror, a police car following them.

“What is it, mum?”

“I... I think – Nothing. Don’t worry. It’s nothing, I think.”

The lights went on, and the siren briefly wailed. She pulled the car over into a side street. The police officer got out to speak to her about her left brake light not working.

She permitted a nervous smile. "Sorry about that," she said. "I didn't know."

"There's something else," he said. "According to our records, you currently hold an invalid driver's licence. You shouldn't be driving."

"What?"

"I'll need to impound your vehicle."

"I... I can't understand. What? Now?"

"I'm afraid so. Yeah. Sorry."

"What's wrong, mum?" Justin asked her.

"Nothing, Justin. It's okay."

They got out of the car. Lisa handed the police officer her keys.

"I know you've fallen on hard times, by the looks of it, but, you know, I need to abide to the law. If," the police officer added, "you need a taxi, I'll be glad to ring one for you and your son."

"No, we'll manage, somehow. Thank you."

#

They'd walked for over two hours, all the way to the East Perth Terminal, with their backpacks and a few other small belongings. Lisa sat on one of the benches there, by the railway tracks, with Justin asleep on her lap.

Later, they moved inside, because of the cold and the outside noise.

Justin woke his mum up around mid-afternoon. "Mum?"

"What?"

"Mum?"

“What... what is it, Justin?” She looked at her wristwatch. “Three-twenty-five. Oh, no. No.” She stood up.

“I... I think we missed our train, mum. Did we?”

They headed outside to the platform, where, looking lengthwise down the tracks, they saw the Prospector train pulling away from them in the distance, getting smaller and smaller.

“Did they forget us?” Justin asked her.

“Uh-huh.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Something,” Lisa said. “I’m not sure what, but I’ll figure out something. Don’t worry, Justin.”

“Okay.”

She tried to get their train tickets to Northam refunded at the ticket counter, but they were, according to the woman seated there, neither refundable nor transferrable.

They slept upright on the chairs as they had before, until a security guard told them not to.

Lisa held her son’s hand, and together they started out into the darkness, two silhouettes against the city’s lights.

“My feet hurt,” Justin said.

“I know. So do mine.”

#

“Oi!”

“Keep moving, Justin,” Lisa said, stumbling in the dark. “Come on.”

“Okay.”

“Hey! Oi!”

“What does he want, mum?”

“I don’t know, but don’t look back. Come on. Let’s go. Hurry.”

No sooner had she said this than the footfalls speeded up. “Hey, lady,” the man behind them said. “I said wait up. I just want to talk to youse. Jesus!”

Lisa held Justin’s hand, pulling him across the street. Justin’s little legs had difficulty keeping up with her.

The man stepped out in front of them on Lincoln Street, Highgate, where, under the nearby streetlight, Lisa saw how skinny and sickly he appeared.

“Damn. I’m not going to hurt you,” the man said.

“Mum, I’m scared.”

“It’s okay.”

“I just want some money.”

“We don’t have any money,” Lisa said.

He shrugged and reached out for her backpack. “Come on, lady.”

“I said no.”

“Mum.” Justin stood next to his mum, trembling. “Mum, I’m scared.”

“Give me the backpack. Dammit.”

“Mum!”

“You’re scaring my son.”

“Like I said... you know... all I want is some money. Shit, that’s not too much to ask for, is it? Is it?”

“And I said we don’t have any money.”

He lunged at her, pulled her backpack from off her shoulder, and then shoved her down to the ground.

“Hey!” Justin jumped in between them. “Leave my mum alone!” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me.”

“Justin, no!” Lisa stood up, wincing. “Don’t.”

The man smiled, rummaged around in her backpack, but found nothing of value.

“Where’s your purse?”

“I don’t have a purse.”

“What’s in that one, then?” he asked her, gesturing to Justin’s backpack. “Give it here, kid.”

“No,” Justin said. “Get lost.”

“Come on.” The man threw Lisa’s backpack aside, and then made for Justin’s, but he stopped short, suddenly bewildered.

“Here,” Justin said, holding out the five-cent coin he’d found the other morning beneath the clothes dryer. “It’s... it’s all we have. Here. Take it. Here.”

Scowling, the man turned and fled back into the shadows without saying as much as a word, empty-handed.

“Oh, Justin!” She squatted down in front of him, and hugged him. “Justin.”

“Are you okay, mum?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

She carried him in her arms as she walked along Beaufort Street, and then down another side street. She feared the man might return.

“Mum, I want to get down.”

“Okay.”

“I could’ve hurt him,” he said, walking beside her, holding her hand. “You know?”

His mum nodded. “I know, but you didn’t. You’re my little hero.”

They walked further down the darkened street, lined mostly with old houses.

“You shouldn’t have stuck up for me,” his mum said.

“I didn’t... didn’t want him to take you away from me. I don’t want to be alone. That’s all, I guess.”

“You’ll never be alone. I’ll always be here for you.”

“I miss dad,” Justin said.

“I know. Me, too.”

#

They continued on foot. She led Justin to a random house, one of the few without its lights on. They needed to find shelter, somewhere safe and hidden, out of view from the street, to rest.

“Come on, Justin.”

“Uh-huh.”

At the end of the driveway, behind the house, was an old fibro garage. To her surprise and good fortune, the padlock gave freely away from the clasp of the side entry door. She swung the door open.

“Mum?”

“Shh,” she whispered. “It’s okay.”

They went inside, shut the door behind them, and then looked around. “I can’t see anything.”

“I can’t, either,” she agreed.

#

“Someday,” he said, “I’d like to take care of you.” They lay together on the concrete floor, on cardboard boxes Lisa had found next to the workbench, and had flattened, shivering. They used their backpacks as pillows.

“You already are taking care of me.”

“I am?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed his shoulders, and then kissed his cheek in the dark. “Of course you are. Do you think of dad much anymore?” she asked him.

“Sometimes.”

“Do you want to talk about it again?”

“Nah.”

“That’s okay.”

Justin yawned, and he fell asleep. Lisa also slept, but they woke up a few minutes later after they heard someone moving around outside the garage. The door handle jiggled.

“Who’s out there?” Justin whispered to his mum.

Helping him to his feet, Lisa said, “I... I don’t know. Shh.”

#

The side entry door swung wide open. A man's figure in silhouette stood there in the doorway, shining the light of his torch over them, as they cowered in the corner of the garage, blinded by the light.

"Who's... who's there?" the man asked.

"Mum?"

"Shh."

"Mum?"

The man switched on the overhead light globe, and then he briefly looked back over his shoulder at someone standing in the dark by the house behind him. "You're not going to believe this, Helen."

"What?"

"Come here."

"Lord, what is it this time?" She came over and stood beside her husband in the doorway, wearing a bathrobe. They were both old. "Oh, hello there," the man's wife said to Justin.

"Hello."

"We didn't mean to break in," Lisa explained. "My son and I... we needed a place to sleep. The door wasn't locked. I just thought... thought, you know, it would --"

"That's okay." The woman smiled, nodding her head. "I know. Don't worry. It's awfully cold out here. Why not come inside? We can talk, if you'd like?"

"No, thanks," Lisa said, shrugging. "We wouldn't want to impose. We'll be on our way. It's just --"

"Nonsense."

"What's your name?" the man (also in a bathrobe) asked Lisa.

"Lisa Wellnigh. This is Justin, my son."

“Mum, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Justin.” Lisa broke down crying. “I... I...”

“Don’t cry, mum. Please. Please don’t cry.”

The woman hobbled over to Lisa, and placed a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“Go put the kettle on,” the woman told her husband. “I think Lisa needs a cup of tea.”

“All right.”

They all went inside.

#

Justin drank hot chocolate from a small mug. A magazine lay on the kitchen table called *War Cry*. The old man told them they didn’t have to worry anymore. His wife added, “We will help you both. It’s what we do best.”

Justin’s mum wiped away the tears from her florid cheeks, and then said, “Thank you. Thank you.”

“Will everything be okay, mum?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Yes, Justin, everything will be okay.”

“Okay,” he said.

THE END