

Trust Walk

by Kimberly Ford

They were two girls walking home from school. Casey had light hair, Sarah dark. Casey was impulsive and friendly, a little reckless. Sarah was shy and intelligent, not one to trust people easily. They were best friends and had been since they were two. This October afternoon—warm but overcast—each wore her hair in ponytails held by red elastics. Their backpacks, light blue with a rainbow on the pocket, were identical.

You'll want to know that I'm the blonde. Less impulsive, less reckless than when I was eight. I'm still friendly and I trust people and I'm the one who remembers things. When I'm with Sarah—whose real name isn't Sarah—I say, "It was Mrs. Nelson's homeroom. The time you threw up on your desk." I say this because we're mothers now—seven children between us—and we often feed everyone dinner together before the dads get home, just like our mothers did when we were little. There were seven of us then too.

I'm talking about vomiting because her second-born threw up at school today. Not on his desk, but I'm going for empathy over accuracy. I can still see yellowed Cream of Wheat running into the little groove for her pencil and the hole that once held a bottle of ink. I can see Mrs. Nelson yanking paper towels from the white metal dispenser.

Sarah leans a hip into the stove. She's stirring a pot of noodles. Her expression says I'm making ninety percent of this up. But her son, straddling the end of a long bench, gapes. I can tell him that the puke looked like hot cereal because I've known his mother since the day I was born and I know him well enough to understand that he'd appreciate the description. I'm the one who remembers.

It wasn't so long ago that one of the girls' mothers, at noon, would have met them in the kindergarten courtyard. That

mother would have trailed behind the two of them, a toddler in a stroller and a retriever on a leash. This year, though, the girls stayed all day. At lunch, they ate peanut butter sandwiches and tollhouse cookies at the outdoor tables with the pigeons and the gulls and the big kids. Later they walked home alone.

The only thing more exciting than walking home alone would have been lining up behind the painted circles on the library sidewalk. There, with the other kids, they would have yelled and whispered and knocked into Patrick Young who smelled like hamburgers. The kids behind the circles took the buses. The bus kids stuck hands and arms and the occasional head out metal-rimmed windows until old Mr. Molak pushed the hip-high gearshift forward and yelled, "Watchiiiiit!" before hauling them away from the curb.

Mr. Molak, of the silver tooth, drove kids into neighborhoods with sidewalks you could rollerskate right up onto. The bus kids' houses were so close together you could look right out your window into your neighbor's. But the girls at the center of this story didn't live in those neighborhoods. Their neighborhoods had no sidewalks. They lived in two- and three-storied houses you could barely see at the end of long, curving drives. They lived next door to each other. Because six-year-old Sarah had written a Christmas Pageant and Casey had starred in it, because their older brothers had slept in each other's tents all summer long, because they had all together built elaborate tree forts in their conjoined backyards, the mothers had asked the handyman to build a gate in their shared fence. The seven kids came and went.

They didn't get to take the bus because the school was in the girls' neighborhood. Bellehaven Lane was quiet, but it had a crossing guard. Joseph was tall and slow and no one noticed when he moved into the crosswalk with his stop sign and his palm raised.

Bellehaven Lane is still quiet. The elementary school's about to undergo its first renovation since 1964. Joseph's successor wears a tall hat of purple synthetic fabric when he stops the car I

drive across town so my kids can swim at my parents' house. Sarah moved when we were twelve. From the mansion next door to an estate eleven curving drives away. We cried and sulked and talked about running away. This was the first in a succession of moves. From an enormous house to a yet larger one, their family's stay in each becoming shorter and more confusing.

But when we were eight, we'd each lived in only one house our entire lives. We hadn't heard of divorce or famine or extortion or nuclear winter. We walked right down the middle of Bellehaven, the faded white line our balance beam. We crossed and re-crossed the lane depending on how well we kicked the rock or the acorn cap, an acorn cap being hard to kick well.

The tiny map we carried in our muscles and in our memories would have looked like a C if anyone had asked us to draw it. Or better yet: an E without its middle arm. Our school sat at the end of the E's top arm, on Bellehaven. We wandered down the lane, made a left onto Oakdell, another onto Fair Oaks. Our houses waited at the bottom of the E: 224 and 226 Fair Oaks Lane.

That overcast afternoon, Casey lagged behind. She kicked a loose piece of asphalt. She called. She ran. "I get to be the mom today." Falling into step. "I had to be the baby yesterday. It's my turn to be the mom."

But Casey had paid Sarah a quarter to play house the day before. Sarah hadn't said anything about playing house again that afternoon.

"Or," Casey said, "if we play school, I get to be the teacher. We can make the little kids be students. I'll let you write on the chalkboard."

Sarah considered. A horn blared. The girls turned. Someone's mom was honking good-bye to Joseph, who waved, then held out his hand to check for rain.

Casey grabbed her friend's sleeve and squeezed her eyes shut. "Trust walk!" she said, because it was Sarah's favorite game.

The concept was simple: one person guided her sightless partner forward, steering her away—in the case of Oakdell Drive—from stop signs and potholes and anything else she cared to imagine.

For example, “Stop!” said Sarah. “There’s a low steel bridge right in front of you.” She whispered, “Get *small*.”

Casey dropped to hands and knees. Sarah was bending to whisper further instructions when she saw, some ten yards behind them, the car.

Larger than the sedans their fathers drove to work, its grille was black, its nose flat and wide, mottled gray under oaks and hawthorns.

Sarah pulled at a backpack strap. “Come on.”

Casey looked up at her best friend. “What?”

But Sarah was moving away.

Casey glanced over her shoulder at nothing but a car.

Sarah was walking away quickly and not looking back. Casey scabbled. She caught up. She said, laughing, “That car’s following us!”

“Shhh!”

Then, slowly enough for the girls to hear the crunch and snap of leaves and twigs, it rolled up alongside.

The man had dark hair and pale skin. On his upper arm, under the short sleeve of his white T-shirt, was tattooed writing that looked like Coca-Cola, but wasn’t. He was older than Casey’s dad, but not as old as Mr. MacLeod, their principal. When he smiled, the man looked nice. He checked the rearview mirror. He lowered his chin and looked serious, as though he were going to tell them something that would make them feel very sorry for him. He stared, as if considering their trustworthiness.

When he asked, “Do you girls want to see me naked?” Casey laughed.

The other night we were talking on the phone. Quietly, because our seven kids were asleep in cribs and bunk beds, one boy sprawled on his older sister's trundle.

"Remember the guy in the car?" I asked.

I knew what she would say because every once in awhile, when I need to remind myself of when we were little, I mention the blanket fort under her pool table or the language we invented for ourselves or the dolls we sewed out of our mothers' remnants. Or the guy in the car, who is more about the *end* of being little.

She said, "The guy who asked, 'Do you girls want to see a naked man?'"

Sarah yanked Casey's arm and they ran.

The car kept pace.

Backpacks thumping from side to side, they passed the adobe with the wolf-dog and the yellow house with the old man who gave out extra-large Hershey's bars at Halloween. They neared the old hitching post at the corner of Oakdell and Fair Oaks and still they were running.

Rounding the corner, they saw the laurel hedge. There was the stand of birches. The twin mailboxes.

And because they were almost home—Casey was sure of it—there was the sound of tires squealing and the air filled with the sweet-sick smell of exhaust.

Casey's lungs burned as she watched the car roar down the lane. Sarah was beyond the hideout they'd made in the redwoods and still running.

"Wait!"

Sarah looked back.

"He's *gone*."

But once Casey caught up they ran again. Past the mailboxes and up the long gravel drive.

Sarah's mother was in the kitchen. The girls stood shoulder-to-shoulder, their chests heaving. Casey grinned. There was nothing to smile about but she couldn't stop. Her backpack thunked to the

ground. She looked at Merry and—still smiling—said, “A man just asked if we wanted to see him naked!”

Merry stared. Then she looked angry. Like last summer when Casey made Sarah eat a spoonful of Renuzits Apple Fresh Gel Air Freshener because it smelled so good. But then Merry pulled the girls to her. She smoothed their heads. She kissed Sarah then Casey then Sarah again. She kept saying, “You're okay. You're okay.” Like she did with the little kids when they fell down.

At a table in a French restaurant—Sarah's fortieth, which might sound like strange timing—I asked Merry, whose name isn't Merry, about that afternoon. She gazed at the empty space above my head, giving the waiter the impression she needed something. “I think I remember a policeman?” She looked at me. “I remember it happened. But I don't remember much about it.”

A week later I sat across a kitchen table from my mom.

“Mmm.” She squinted. “I remember a policewoman talking to you two in the dining room.”

“A *policewoman*?”

“In the old dining room. Before we remodeled.”

There was the clicking whir of a rotary phone being dialed. Merry spoke into the receiver, fiercely. Still talking, she slung her purse over her shoulder. She grabbed keys from beside a bowl of apples just pulled from the tree. She lifted the baby from her walker and they were running—even Merry—down the aster and flagstone walk, through the gate in the fence, across the lawn and into the other house.

In the kitchen there, the two moms spoke in low voices. Casey's mom was quiet. Casey watched her mother less closely than she'd watched Merry because her mom didn't get mad. And because Casey was starving. She took a handful of saltines from the box on the counter. She shoved two in her mouth. Her mother listened to Merry. When Jane sat in a chair near where the girls stood, she

seemed thoughtful, and far away. “What I wonder,” Jane said, “is if you could tell us something about the man.”

She looked from Casey—who was chewing and nodding, wide-eyed—to Sarah.

Sarah blinked. “The man?”

“Or...the car?” said Jane.

Casey nodded, swallowed hard. “Like a shark,” she said. “The car looked exactly like a shark.”

Across seven plates of buttered noodles, Sarah said to me, “I remember it started raining.”

“Yes! We had on those ponchos my mom made for us.” Mine was yellow, hers red. I remember a teal leotard under a yellow poncho.

“We got to skip gymnastics,” Sarah said.

Her leotard was black.

When the toddler at the kitchen window shrieked, the children and their mothers turned to see the police cruiser gliding up the drive.

The officer slammed the car door. He stood gazing up at the house. The hat he tucked under his arm had a shiny brim. He hitched up his pants.

Jane hurried to the door with children around her and Merry at her side, Sarah's hand in her mother's. Jane pulled open the massive oak door.

“Afternoon, folks.”

Merry thanked him for coming. Jane invited him in.

The officer pulled a notepad from his shirt pocket and wrote down what the mothers told him.

“Oakdell,” Merry said. “About half-an-hour ago.”

“Around three,” said Jane, and, “Yes,” when he asked if the man had been driving a gray car and if he'd been Caucasian—because the station had just gotten another call. Then the most exciting part for Casey, her mother sounding even angrier

than when the babysitter left them alone to drive to the corner store: "This man asked if they wanted to see him naked!"

The officer stowed the pad. He dropped to his haunches, knees splayed. The hat in his hands seemed heavier up close, harder, with a gold insignia and black tassels above the glossy brim. He smiled a smile meant for little kids. He said, "I understand you girls spoke to a man this afternoon."

Casey nodded. "We did."

"Your mothers told me. Now I'd like your help. If you saw that man again, would you be able to say so?"

"I could." Casey nodded again and lifted her chin, thinking how proud her dad would be.

It never occurred to me, until just now, to ask my dad about any of this. Dads were at the office. Dads fixed sprinkler heads and mixed drinks for friends on the patio and laughed at things we didn't understand. Dads meant dinners in the dining room with cloth napkins and grace and "May I please be excused?" Dads believed in work ethic and made us mow lawns all summer even though one of us was allergic and had to wear swim goggles while pushing the mower back and forth.

And I never talked to an older brother about this either. The older brothers did things like: hide a ten-speed behind the pool house then swear they were just borrowing it. The brothers may or may not have been the ones who touched the match to the bottle rocket that set Mr. Richter's roof on fire. Brothers dyed their hair black and wore trench coats and listened to Suicidal Tendencies. Brothers were sent to boarding school because they weren't getting along with their fathers.

We girls played house, which meant a mother and a baby. Maybe a toddler. A stuffed cat.

Outside, the officer held open the front passenger door. The girls sat on the wide bench-seat next to him, Merry on hard molded plastic in the back. No safety belts.

"So," he said once they were out on Fair Oaks. "You girls like school?"

They nodded.

"Who're your teachers?"

"We lucked out." Casey pulled a leg under her to see out the window better. "We're in the same class this year."

"Miss Hubbard." Sarah was in the middle, careful not to touch any part of her body to the officer's. And careful to answer his questions.

"She lets us read every day after lunch," Casey offered. "On a big pile of cushions she brought from home."

"Sounds nice."

On the right was the new church with the stained glass that looked like flames. Then the cleaners and Foster's Freeze and the soccer fields where the girls looked, reflexively, for the older brothers.

"I'm reading *Harriet the Spy*," said Casey.

"Never heard of it."

"I want to be a spy when I grow up," Casey said, because a spy seemed like a police officer. Even though she wanted to be a mom, or a teacher. "Sarah wants to be a spy too."

Sarah looked at Casey.

"Or maybe a doctor."

They passed their piano teacher's street and the high school before turning onto an oak-lined road much like their own. About fifty feet away from a small adobe building, the officer pulled over to the curb. The girls had been there once before. To register their bikes.

The officer cut the engine. "Well!"

He took the notepad from his shirt pocket and flipped to a certain page. He pulled the radio from under the dash. When he pressed the button and spoke, his voice sounded different. Deeper, more pointed.

“Molloy?” There was static then a loud beep. “Yeah,” he said. “Out front.” The officer smiled broadly at the girls then said into the radio, “Bring him out, would you?”

He replaced the radio and sat back, waiting.

I was twelve when I heard—from Merry, or my own mother, or from one of Sarah's sisters, but not from Sarah herself—a story I didn't understand. My family had spent the summer in Europe. Sarah's family, coincidentally, had done the same. In a hotel in Germany, Sarah and her younger sisters rode an elevator with a man who “did something to them.” The story, vague as it was, may have been told as cautionary. Or to explain why the middle sister was suddenly avoiding elevators. What happened wasn't at all clear to me. I didn't ask. Instead, I imagined the back of a man. A large man. *Fat* even. Always, my perspective was from an upper corner of the elevator where I floated behind him, facing the girls, never from the perspective of the girls' themselves. That way, I realize now, I couldn't actually *see* the withered purple slug hanging against his wool pants. I don't see the face of the single girl he presses—fly zipped this time—into his stomach. Because I'm in the corner, I see only his back when he presses his bulk into the three of them, mashing them into the wall with such force that they're out of my sight.

Thirty years later I'm not asking anyone what happened in the elevator. Because I've asked a lot of questions recently about the man in the car. No one really wants to talk about these things.

A few minutes later, a glass door opened under an arch in the cream-colored building. The officer pointed a meaty finger as a second policeman pushed through the doorway. He led a man by the elbow. The man wore a white T-shirt and dark pants. He had dark hair and pale skin. His hands were behind his back and his head was bowed, as though he were thinking.

“That's him!” Casey reached to roll down the window, but the officer held out a flat hand and she sat back. “See that black just

below his sleeve?" she asked. "That's the writing I told you about!"

"Huh." The officer's mouth pulled down at the corners, but in a way that meant he was impressed. "Alrighty then."

He reached for the radio and Casey grinned. She looked to her best friend.

But Sarah seemed worried. Sad even. Like the morning the sparrow flew into the window and survived the hour then died.

"What?" Casey looked back to the station to be sure she hadn't missed anything. The man was standing there just like before. Casey looked to Sarah. She glanced back across the sloping lawn and the terracotta walkway to the man who was, then, staring back at her.

And she understood. This was a police station. He was a bad man.

How had Sarah known to stay quiet? How had she known the officer was about to push open his door and step out of the car, leaving them alone? How had Sarah known that the brothers had stolen the bicycle and how did she know they needed baking soda, not powder, and when had she learned to open a combination lock? Why hadn't she reached out, when they were standing in the foyer talking to the officer, and put a hand over Casey's mouth?

I stand at the sink drying a cookie sheet. Sarah's on the long bench, a toddler in her lap. She's incredulous. "What?" She shakes her head. "We didn't *identify* the guy. They never *caught* the guy."

But for me, the man under the archway and the Coca-Cola tattoo and the drizzle persist.

At least the drizzle persists. I hear the swish of wipers. I remember feeling hot under a vinyl poncho in an overly warm police car. I stare up at a cloudy sky from the wide front seat and I remember—as if I were watching my eight-year-old daughter do it herself—pulling a foot under me to see better.

"I guess they wouldn't ask eight-year-olds to ID some pedophile." I think about it, doubting myself. "I guess it would've been hard to catch him so fast."

She laughs a little at me, the one who remembers, as she makes room on the bench. For my son.

