

Shade to Shade

by Spencer Strub

Cathy told the boy to sit in the seat behind her, and gave him her scarf for his face. He nodded and plucked the scarf gingerly from her hands, suspending it between the clean thumb and ring finger on his left hand.

Cathy watched him as he held it. "You're going to muss it anyway. I gave it to you to muss. I've got detergent at home that takes blood out, don't worry."

"Okay, ma'am."

The boy took his seat and lifted the scarf to his face. He held it in all his fingers now. She watched in the rear-view mirror as the scarf purpled in the spreading blood.

She had found him at dusk at the bus stop. She could see him from back at the stop sign. From there, he just looked like a drunk or a junkie. She was used to those. If they didn't have money, they didn't come onto the bus, but she always felt obliged to check to see whether they were still alive. Twelve years driving a bus, and everyone by the road had been alive. The relief was always bittersweet.

Whoever had done it had taken his coat, but he wasn't shivering. He lay still, curled on the gravel shoulder, looking broken and worn like the discarded divan two blocks up. His hands covered his face.

"Hey hon," she said. She knew she sounded like a waitress in a diner when she spoke this way, but once the mannerism entered her speech she couldn't shake it. "Hey hon, what are you doing lying here without a coat?"

He opened his hands, the fingers coming apart like blooming petals. He was a boy, her guess ten or eleven, at most a small thirteen. She saw now that brown blood was caked on his palms and in the spaces between his fingers, and was still running down his face out of his nose and from the corners of his mouth. His whole face was creased and warped: his cheeks and lips were swollen, the bridge of his nose

cracked, his eyes receding back into swelling black sockets. He looked at her silently.

"Oh come on honey, get on my bus."

"I'm taking you to the hospital, okay?"

He nodded and thanked her. He was very polite. Cathy knew better than to ask what happened, but she needed to know a few things, for practical reasons. "Do you want me to talk to anybody else?"

"Not unless you have to." He spoke slowly and deliberately.

"I'm probably going to need to call your parents. Unless--" She met his eyes in the mirror.

"No, that's okay."

"Are you sure? I have a spare room, you could stay with me as long as you need to."

"No. It wasn't my mom."

"Okay. That's all I needed to know." She waited for a moment, watching as the car in front of her wobbled as it pulled away from the stoplight. The cold made cars slip on the ice. "You should probably talk to the police. Especially if it might happen again."

He looked at his lap. "Probably."

She couldn't help but wonder what he had done wrong to deserve this.

She had to circle the whole parking lot twice before giving up and parking on the street. She suspected that the bus would get ticketed there, but she couldn't let the boy go in by himself. He accepted the hand that she offered as they walked across the parking lot, clutching it with sticky fingers. He was still a little bit shocked, and she needed to pull his arm to keep him from stepping through the icy skin of the black puddles that gathered by the curb. The hospital was a typical rural health center, low-slung and brown, just a few rooms. The waiting room was empty aside from a hollow-eyed old man and a teenager with a long gash running down his leg. The nurses greeted Cathy warmly, the sides of their eyes crinkling at seeing her again for the first time in years. They let their history

remain unspoken, for which she was grateful. She let herself smile back at them, and explained the situation briefly. "Oh, isn't that a shame," the young nurse at reception said. "That poor boy."

After they had checked in, Cathy called the boy's mother from the nurses' phone. She thanked Cathy for her kindness, and said she'd leave work and come down immediately. "If you need to go," she said, "I'll be there in just a few minutes."

"I don't need to be anywhere. I'd like to stay a little while with him, if that's okay."

"Of course. Thank you."

She sat next to him in the waiting room. He was very quiet, but he laid his head on her shoulder. She looked at the Vietnamese and Tagalog pamphlets she had plucked from the seat next to her, puzzling over the weird words, trying not to look around too much. More quickly than Cathy would have expected, the nurse took him away, her arm enveloping his shoulders, speaking in his ear in hushed tones. A few minutes later his mother arrived, looking flustered and scared. Cathy stayed in her seat, waiting to see him enter his car whole.

When Cathy's daughter was sick, she had waited in this same room. The doctors would let her come in sometimes, but often they needed to be alone. So she would sit in the waiting room, not reading the year-old issue of *Parenting* open in her lap, just staring at the walls. Each day, when they let her daughter out, Cathy cradled her in her arms, rocking her and singing.

She rose from her chair when he emerged back into the waiting room. The nurse had cleaned his face and dressed the worst of the cuts. The bruises and swelling were still there, but they seemed less grave with the layer of blood cleared off. Cathy met his eyes as he walked out. They still receded back into his head. She felt vaguely reassured by the permanence of his trauma.

Cathy and the boy's mother converged on him by the reception desk. Tears ran down his mother's face, and she opened her arms as she

drew close. He fell into her, gently setting his broken face into her chest. Cathy stood and watched. She wasn't entirely sure what she should do.

The boy's mother looked at her quizzically for a long moment. Then recognition spread across her faced and she nodded once. "Thank you," she said.

Cathy smiled. "It was nothing."

The boy gripped the stained scarf in his left hand. He looked at Cathy. "Thank you for the scarf and the ride," he said. He held it out to her. "Sorry I got it dirty."

She took it from him. "I can clean it."

His mother thanked her once more, and led him out of the hospital, her hand on his. Cathy stayed in the waiting room. She stood and watched them walk out across the parking lot. She was in this waiting room alone again. As they left, she held the scarf close.

