Keisha

by Susan Gibb

Keisha was the name she gave us. She said she had no father and no last name. We wrote her down as Keisha B. We already had a Keisha A.

She was about twelve though she told us fourteen. Her eyes were older than we dared think. We knew her mother had been murdered and that's all. She was skinny and short. Her thick hair was missing in patches and I thought abuse but Mary said it was just poor nutrition. Mary knows more about these things, about the children. She's been taking them in for eighteen years.

I paired Keisha up in a room with a girl a little older named Samantha. Samantha had been raped by her brother. She had been with us two years. She would dance and joke with the other girls but she wouldn't speak to a boy or a man, not even the priest who visited on Saturdays.

The two girls didn't bond instantly but Keisha did keep Samantha in sight. She'd sit a row behind her in classrooms, watch her from the benches when Sam ran track. Well, track is what we called it. It was really running around the perimeter of the lawn beside the small parking lot in front of the school.

Keisha was making good progress, maybe leaving whatever horrors behind. She was well-behaved, caused no trouble as many of them do until they settle in. She was extremely bright though self-conscious and I learned that a smile was the most she'd accept as praise.

She excelled in writing. I suspected it came from a childhood filling up lonely days and scary nights with dreams. One essay she wrote was so creative, so fresh, I was determined to let her know this was

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one of her strongest talents.

She thought she'd done something wrong. Her head hung down, her hands folded on the desk, limp as leaves. I went over and sat at the desk in front of her.

“Keisha, this was so well-written,” I said, “I'm very impressed with your imagination and how you put it into words.” I was careful not to gush. They're wary, these children. “Have you thought about maybe being a teacher? Or certainly, a writer? Maybe a journalist?”

She shook her head but did look up at me. She was reading my eyes to see if I was lying. Her eyes were like glasses of iced whiskey. Crystal light, deep and cracked into slivers by things I couldn't imagine. My heart twisted but I couldn't let her see that in mine.

“No,” she said. She smiled small, using only the outside corners of her mouth.

“Do you enjoy writing stories?” I asked. She nodded but her eyes held tight. “It might be something you'll consider. You certainly have talent for it and with time and reading, it could be your calling.” I mentally kicked myself. As if these girls knew what a “calling” was. Many hadn't even the notion of hope when they got here.

I gave her a notebook, not fancy, but not the plain copybook she used for classwork. It had a navy leather-look cover and binding, with a pocket inside with a pen. I gave her two books to read.

I saw her carrying the notebook around with her. It was a good sign. I hoped she'd share her writing with me but didn't push, waited for her to make the next move.

Then one morning she was gone. I blamed myself, despite Mary's assertions that you use your education, experience, instincts, and

sometimes you get through and make a difference and sometimes you don't.

The police searched her old neighborhood. Nobody claimed to have seen her. Worse, nobody claimed to remember her.

My insides felt like they'd leaked out. I couldn't even draw a deep breath. Samantha was silent, could offer no help. I searched their room for Keisha's notebook, thinking maybe she'd left some sort of hint. I could not find it.

I think of Keisha and hope that somehow, somewhere she made it. She's in a gallery in my mind along with Deeva, and Joanna, and Shakira, and too many more.