

HERMAN

I'll never forget that day I quit. June 3rd 1957. My wife, Geneva and me was still living in Alabama back then. That day Geneva had left early to clean house for a white lady who live on the other side of the hill. Mary, our little girl was sleep in her crib. I'm sitting there trying to wind down after working hard all night, but I can't. 'Cause I'm out of smokes and feeling fidgety... you know. I was a chain smoker. I'm surprised I never got lung cancer. I'd have me two, three cigarettes burning in a ashtray at the same time. I light my next one with the butt of the one I was smoking. Mary was sleeping sound. Shoot. Wouldn't take me more than ten minutes to run up to the store and back to get me a pack.

I pay the store clerk for the smokes and rip the pack open before he could give me my change back good. I step outside to light it. Can't wait to taste the tobacco... drag that smoke down in my lungs.

Smoke!

Smoke...? I smell smoke! It coming from the direction of my house. "Mary!" Cigarette drops out of my mouth. I trample the pack running. Smoke thick. Smell strong. Fire loud. It sound like a thousand whips cracking 'cross the back of my hopes. Faster. Chest burning. Gasping. Praying. God please, Please, PLEASE...! But even through the smoke my watery eyes can see that our tiny house is in flames. But the volunteer firemen are there. Thank god.

Thank you Jesus!

"Did you get Mary out?" I'm wheezing. "Where's Mary...?" I'm running toward the house but the Fireman stop me. "You can't go in there. It too dangerous!"

“But Mary in there. My baby girl in there! I got to get her out!”

“Can’t let you go in there.” He say. “We doing our best.”

Just then another fireman run out coughing with a little bundle wrapped in Mary’s blanket.

“Thank you. Thank you!” I’m crying, my knees weak with relief.

“Thank you, Jesus!” I’m reaching for Mary but the Fireman say he sorry. He telling me he couldn’t save Mary.

What?

Just then I hear my name. “Herman...? Herman!” It Geneva. I turn around. She at the top of the hill wearing a white apron with a broom in her hand. The look on her face ‘fore she drop that broom and start running down the hill still haunts me today. I reach out to hug her up so she have something to hold when I tell her Mary gone. But when she see my empty arms she push past me running and screaming toward the house.

Fireman stop her. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. Too much smoke. Wasn’t nothing we could do.”

Geneva drop to the ground like her legs been chopped off. She fall face down, hands grabbing grass, tears turning dirt to mud. The sound that come out of Geneva ain’t earthly. The air stop breathing. I pick her up and hold her to me. “Geneva... it happen so fast. I was just gone a minute. I--”

“Where was you...?” Geneva look at me. “WHERE *WAS* YOU?”

And when she see my shame, her fists was everywhere. Beating my chest. My head. My face. I needed her hate. I knew my own would never be enough. I want her to kill me, but she faint when she see my bloody nose.

We take her to the hospital. but she never recover from losing Mary. Geneva couldn't have no more babies. She damn near die giving birth to our baby girl. Geneva was so strick with grief she dwindle down to nothing.

Every now and then a tear roll down her cheek, but mostly her eyes blank. She lost her mind that day and the only reason I didn't lose mine was 'cause she need me.

Nobody ever knew what cause that fire. It was a long time ago. But I do know it was me that kill Mary, sure as if I done it with my own hands. That was the day quit and I never smoke a cigarette again.

One night, years later, I meet Liam in the Intensive Care Unit of Providence Hospital. Geneva had had a massive stroke. He was a Chaplain. His wife had been hit by a bus and was hanging on for dear life. We talked all night while them doctors work to save both our wives. By morning we was friends. He cried in my arms when they tell him his wife didn't make it. Before he left he hug me, shake my hand and he tell me this, "Quitting smoking ain't enough, Herman. You have to forgive yourself too. You've dragged your guilt around and punished yourself long enough. You have to forgive yourself so you can live."

I tell him, "Some things don't seem right to forgive even after forty-seven years... I can't."

He look at me.

"I don't deserve it," I plead with him. "I don't know how."

Liam look at me a long time before he say, "Then *I* forgive you, Herman."

I don't what to say. We shake hands. I tell him again how sorry I am about his wife. When he left I knew I would never see him again.

A few hours later, the doctors come out and tell me I got to make a decision whether to take Geneva off of life support.