

2009 - 2010: Salvation

Laura Freer

"Hello?"

The well-dressed, somewhat rumpled woman felt as though she had been sitting there forever, and at the same time was having trouble remembering how she got there, or for that matter who she was. It was as if she had gone to sleep in a strange place and in that first moment of waking had lost herself completely. There were no external clues, nothing to trigger a flash of recognition or even a sense of how she ended up...here. The wooden chair she was sitting on was small and uncomfortable, like the chairs she remembered in her Sunday school classes that pinched her when she shifted. The floor was wood, old and battered, and seemed endless beyond the ring of light surrounding her. She squinted at the dark beyond but could make nothing out. Perhaps she heard murmuring, the sounds of feet shuffling and papers flapping? It was hard to tell if she could hear that, or nothing at all.

"Hello?"

A throat cleared. It wasn't hers. It was like... a trial. That's it. She knew trials; she visited her husband at them. Yes, her husband, a lawyer. Trials. Husband. She felt a thrill knowing that she had a piece of the puzzle of her identity in hand. Let's see, husband, house... yes, they had a house, a car, his job, she didn't have a job? It seemed like she should...no, she went to school, she met her husband there, she had plans, why no job?

They had a baby. She remembered now and immediately felt sick. She had forgotten her son, for whom she had given up a career and a social life, and what was wrong with her, thinking this way? She loved being a stay-at-home mom, didn't she? Flashes of conversations were coming back to her now, sitting in the living room with other well-dressed women, saying things like "You know, it's really the best thing for the children" and "Honestly, I feel like I have a full-time job right here." She remembered, though she no longer felt, a peculiar sense of pride in the fact that she did not rely on nannies or maids to care for her child like some of the other mothers did, but something about the memory tasted like bile in her throat. Something not about what was remembered, but about what was being forgotten.

Now a cough interrupted her thoughts, and she returned to-wherever she was. She tried to find the source of the cough but she still couldn't make out anything beyond the circle of light surrounding her, nothing but the wooden floor. She remember something else now; not just a trial, but an interrogation. Yes, like the old cop movies she watched with her family when she was young, and the thought gave her pause.

"What do you want?"

She was using her authoritative voice now, the voice she used on her son when he was misbehaving, the voice that was strong, firm, but not harsh or hateful. The other mothers complimented her on her ability to sound reprimanding and yet not rude or unpleasant.

But it wasn't always that way.

Was it a voice, or a thought? She couldn't tell, like she couldn't tell if she was really hearing the muttering of a crowd behind the light. She pictured men leafing through papers and leaning over to speak softly to their neighbors. The voice/thought would belong to a tall man like her father who had the ability to speak in a voice that never raised above a whisper but could be heard a block away.

Why don't you tell them what happened that morning?

That morning... that morning. Somehow she knew what was meant. That morning...

"I was taking my son to preschool for the first time, and we were walking, hand-in-hand. We were late, and he was trying to stop every few feet and play with his new shoes. After several warnings, I had to pull him up rather quickly in order to get him to stop, something quite out of the ordinary for me, but we were late. He overreacted, fell, and struck his head on the car nearby. When I went to pick him up he must have been dazed because he ran away from me. Of course I ran after him but I couldn't catch him before the crossing and the truck. And that's the last thing I remember."

She saw rather than heard her own words, read them off of the air like they were on paper. They were solid, and were completely separate from herself. God, it didn't even sound like her, did it? Then again, thinking over her life in a place like this, it didn't sound much like her, a housewife in the suburbs. It seemed so unreal.

Tell them again.

She was confused. She opened her mouth:

"I was taking my son to preschool for the first time, and we were walking, hand-in-hand. We were late: the hot water wasn't working, and my husband was very busy with this case and he was too busy, of course, to be able to help get our son off to school on his first day.

He's always busy with a case these days, isn't he?

His son.

"Yes, his son. Then on the way to school my boy was trying to stop every few feet and play with his new shoes, saying something about them bothering him, which was of course nonsense. We picked the shoes out ourselves; all the mothers were saying they were absolutely the best. Perhaps I was a little strict, pulling him up and giving him that swat, but certainly he overreacted. Then he fell and struck his head on the car nearby."

White. The car was white.

"When I went to pick him up he must have been dazed because he ran away from me. Of course I ran after him but I couldn't catch him before he reached the crossing, and then there we were in front of that truck. And that's the last thing I remember."

There was another story here, she knew, behind the one that was flowing away like a script, behind the words that surely weren't even hers. The chair squeaked and groaned as she moved, just like it did in Sunday school. She remembered the withered old woman glaring at them and reading them Scriptures without context or explanation. The watery eyes rolled and the ancient voice rasped words that she could hear even now in her mind:

But women will be saved through childbearing.

"Yes."

Tell them again.

She licked her lips, and began to speak slowly, haltingly, like she was speaking for the first time in a long time, and she couldn't stop her words anymore than she could stop the tears rolling down her face.

"It's been going on for a long time now, ever since a few months after he was born. He had a way of grinding his head into my arm when I held him in a way that just set my teeth on edge. But what can you do? It was the best thing for him, for me to stay with him. My husband and I hadn't been married very long, and we were still full of untold things. How do you even begin to hint to your husband that you hate his child? Men, they don't understand how the small things grind you down every single day, every day

until there is nothing left. They don't understand the anger and the frustration of diapers and toys and noises and the fact that this tiny little thing needs you so desperately, so completely, that his life is wholly dependent on you and you're his world and there's no room for anything else, no room for anything for you, just you. And so I started to pinch him, just a little, just to take the edge off when he was fussing, but I couldn't stop, and he got older and he'd start this crying, this sad wailing, and I knew it was my fault and that I was a horrible mother and that just made everything worse. I had to give so much to the people around me, to my husband, the neighbors, the local community organizations, the endless events and parties. I had nothing left for this child, nothing except the platitudes of my generation, nothing except hate and a fist when no one else was there.

I thought having a baby would make me a woman, like my mother, but there was no magical moment where I looked at my baby and everything fit. I thought having a baby would save me, that through giving birth I could be reborn as a new person. But they lied, the old woman lied, and I was the same as I had ever been. Oh God, what happened to our son? What have I done?

That morning... was taking my son to preschool for the first time, and we were walking, hand-in-hand, and I put his shoe on the wrong foot. I didn't mean to—we were late and I was rushed and I was smoldering with anger at my husband, who left us every day to our misery—and I put his shoe on the wrong foot, Jesus forgive me. I knew it was my fault but I made him walk, I knew but it made me happy, God help me it made me happy to see him suffering a little. Happy and guilty and I hated myself and him. He wouldn't stop crying and I told myself didn't have time to change it and I swore I'd fix it when we got there but he just kept crying 'Mommy, Mommy' and have mercy on me, I just got so mad. I just, I just was so mad, and he used to dig his head into my arm! Christ, I, I just hit him and he cringed and that made me angrier and I hit him more and more and then there was a car next to me and—oh God, oh merciful God—I hit his head into that nice new white car and the blood, the red blood on the white car and all down his white shirt. I saw him then, my baby, through the blood and the anger and I just wanted to clutch him to me, to drown myself with his blood, and to make everything okay. Is that what it is to be a mother? I wanted to hold him close and pull him back inside of me, where he could be safe from everything and I could go away and it would just be the two of us and we would be saved, we would both be saved! And then, he ran. And the crossing, and the truck, and then..."

Tell them again.

"No, not again!" The woman screamed as she stood, shaking her fists at the unknown audience. "How many times have I told you? What more do you want from me? I told you I did it, I killed him! I killed my baby! Why? Why are you doing this to me? He was supposed to save me! He was supposed to save me! Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus God, help me, help me!"

She sank back into her chair sobbing, fists in her eyes. After some time, if indeed it was any time at all, her sobbing ceased, and she stared blankly at the darkness beyond the light. The well-dressed, somewhat ruffled woman felt as though she had been sitting there forever, and at the same time was having trouble remembering how she got there, or for that matter who she was. It was as if she had gone to sleep in a strange place and in that first moment of waking had lost herself completely.

"Hello?"

A throat cleared, and then a voice, or a thought, spoke or came into existence, as if it belonged to a man like her father who had the ability to speak in a voice that never raised above a whisper but could be heard a block away.

Why don't you tell them what happened that morning?

Somehow she knew what morning it was talking about, and she opened her mouth:

"I was taking my son to preschool for the first time, and we were walking, hand-in-hand..."