

The Smell of Oil

Sharon Sperry

A SMALL gray car pulled to the curb along a narrow street in the slum area of the north section of town. Frank, the social worker, a narrow man in a green sweater, got out and stood momentarily studying the brown shack in front of him. He took a breath and sucked in the peculiar air that reeked of oil and coal dust. It was disgusting air that scratched his throat. Almost as if he had gulped muddy water, he pushed it out, and wondered why after a career of contact with this air he never learned to breathe it easily.

While he stood thinking, the girl who had come along slipped up beside him. Carol was a small girl with a head full of bobbed curls and wide eyes that gazed at the scraggly lawn before them. She had approached him at the lunch counter at school. A paper for sociology, she had explained. Would he take her to a typical family? Typical, he had snorted. Typical was a middle class word where families were moderate in all their pleasures and failures. Nothing was at all typical of poverty. There was no typical way to go about being wretched. He had consented reluctantly. She was clean, almost too clean and proper, and he wasn't able to guess, looking at those wide eyes, how she would react to the Harrisons.

He had briefed her as they drove across the city. Four people lived in one room and shared a bathroom with the family next door. There was no man in the family, only one young boy under ten. Grandma Harrison lived with her daughter, Greta, whose husband had disintegrated from alcohol five years earlier. He had left her childless. Now she had two children, one of them a baby girl. Carol had lifted her eyebrows at that.

He tried to guess again, watching her absorb the shack whether that tiny lift of the eyebrows was his signal to turn the car around and take her back to school.

The shack door opened and Grandma Harrison's blubber arm waved them both into the room where everyone sat around a long table. Greta had the baby against her stomach which was still swollen. Carol asked if she could hold it and Frank watched Greta plop it unconcerned into her lap.

The boy, Bobby, had a cold and hacked a cough that sounded to Frank like something more serious. He made a mental note to get the boy to the clinic on the weekend. Greta had stuffed his ears with cotton. To keep them from dripping, she explained.

"Did ya see the flowers when ya come in?" she asked, leaning across her lap.

Frank shook his head and she burst into laughter.

"From the man that gave me that one," she pointed to the baby in Carol's arms. "Kin ya imagine? He sent me roses with a stork on a stem. Some joke, huh? Roses fer me. Jest on accounta the kid."

"Who was the man?" Carol asked.

"Is, ya mean, honey. He is my man. He's married to the woman two blocks down who runs the beauty shop. Gets pretty good business, I hear. Can't keep track of him, though, so I do it."

She hooted and wiped a tear across her cheek. Frank noticed that Bobby had crept to Carol's elbow and while Greta chuckled, he had reached over and kissed the baby on the mouth. Carol's face twitched and she darted a glance at Frank. He frowned slightly. Bobby kissed the baby once more. Greta saw it and slammed the table with her hand.

"Git outa there. Ya wanna give her a cold, too?"

Greta turned back to Frank, but Frank was watching Bobby who still stood gazing raptly at the baby. He rocked slowly to the balls of his feet and leaning gracefully across Carol's arm, he dropped his head slowly until his lips just touched the baby's cheek. Then, as carefully as before he rocked back. In the silence which surrounded the motion Frank could hear no crying from the streets nor the tin rattle of cans on the pavement. The rats within the walls had ceased their squealing and all the block was still as Bobby kissed the baby.

"Goddamit!" Greta screamed. "Can't ya hear? Git outa there!"

Frank sighed as the little boy scampered into a corner of the room, and catching Carol's eye he saw a lonely tear rolling down her face.

"Well, Greta," he said as he stood. "Thanks for letting us see the baby. I'm coming by this weekend to take the boy to the doctor, and I'll see you then."

The air was cold and dark. Frank stared at the row of shacks which stretched along the street, and endless line of broken buildings, all exactly alike in the night. He knew the tiny differences to be seen in the day: a broken fence beside a dirt walk, a potted plant which hung brown leaves across a porch, a three-corner tear in a screen door, a frame chair rocked back against a wall. At night the forms of difference melted into shadows, and the smell, the ever-present odor, was their common feature. Frank sighed again and climbed into the car. Carol was already in, sitting on the front seat with her knees held rigidly together. He turned the key and started the heater.

"Wasn't it tender?" she asked.

"What?"

"The way he kissed the baby."

"Probably get pneumonia next week."

She looked at him and the dashboard lights glowed in her eyes.

"What a cynical attitude."

"It's natural."

"You're just hardened, that's all. You've lost all sight of the beauty that exists even in this place."

"It's not beautiful that that baby has a slim chance of growing straight and clean—that she's damned before she begins—that all the help I'll give her is to offer medicine and food and clothes—that ten

years from now she'll start the crooked race that leads at last to more bastards."

"And didn't you notice Bobby's eyes?"

"What about them?"

"They were beautiful. Round and full of love, so very deep and warm."

"It's all he has."

"What?"

"When your body is riddled with starvation and cold and your mind never opens on the light of day, the eyes are all that's left. He can't hear anything more than the beer bottles in the trash or the squalling from the next room or the talk of his mother, and he doesn't care to talk himself because all he could say is useless. Then all that's left is to look, and once in awhile, when the clouds of oil lift in the early morning, he catches sight of the downtown buildings, the sand-blasted stone. Oh, that probably sounds cold to you. Dreaming about stone buildings, because you know they're just offices, but he doesn't. He used to ask me who lived in them. I suppose he thought they were huge castles, or something. But he'll grow up and learn that they're just offices, that some of them are police courts. He'll probably get to know them pretty well. He'll lose those big eyes, and he'll take to the bottle, a sort of suicide, I guess you'd say."

He had put a special stress in his voice and she turned her head away. He shrugged and pulled into the street to begin the drive back.

"Then why, if you feel that way, do you do this?"

"It's a job."

"That's not an answer."

"Listen. There are several things you'd better learn before you start this sort of life. First, you don't get teary eyed everytime one bastard kisses another bastard. If you do you'll go to pieces. You feel, yeah, but only within the limits of your own mental health."

Rain had begun to fall and he switched on the windshield wipers. They flapped across the window and spread the beads to fine streaks that rippled his view of the street.

"Then, I won't go into it," she announced flatly. "I can't stop feeling."

"Then don't come back again. Don't visit. Don't get close to anyone there."

She looked curiously at him and frowned slightly.

"And why do you say that?"

"Because it happens that some people get too close, get so close they can't get away," he paused. "Oh, it's just good advice. Take it."

He stopped the car in front of the castle like structure that was the dormitory and smiled.

"I'll see you."

"Yes, do. Look me up if you're in the cafeteria when I'm there. Thanks for the ride."

He waved goodbye to her, and started to pull from the curb when a numbing thought passed his mind. In the apartment building, an empty room awaited him. In his closet the clothes he owned smelled of oil. He looked back at the walk. She was inside the door, safe from the rain, shaking out her scarf. Watching her, he suddenly wanted to go home and shake out his clothes, to get rid of the stench of oil.

UNDER THE LIME TREES

Blue unicorns bathing in the moonlight. . . .

And a wreath around the moon. . . .

I, in my time have ridden the unicorn

And revelled in the glory of my loin.

My flesh burns and I am without myself ;

Yet I am called to reason by the sweeping

Ivory curve of a gentle throat descending unto a trembling breast.

Come to me my love, and cool my brow with your caresses.

Come to me my love and I will plait your hair,

And we shall be as children in our love.

Innocence unto innocence cleaves purity ;

And we shall walk hand in hand under the lime trees.

CHRISTOPHER A. THOMAS