

Abraham Feldman and Pottery Man

Danny's face was streaked with dirt and he was crying. His eyes got all squinched up like little prunes. I had never seen a guy in the eighth grade cry before. Abraham just looked at him and snickered. None of us said anything because we didn't want Abraham to turn on us. Usually he went after big kids like Danny. But last weekend he had thrown firecrackers at some of my friends who were walking home from Rachel Hollander's birthday party. He stole their party favors, too—keychains with furry faces.

Abraham wasn't even supposed to be on school property, but the teachers were too afraid to ask him to leave. He was about six feet tall and carried a switchblade in the black pocket of his jeans. We heard that he was pretty old, about eighteen, and that he had gotten kicked out of high school for throwing a chair out the window. Danny should never have told the police that he saw Abraham near the newsstand the night before it burned down. Everyone knew Abraham would get him for ratting. It was just a matter of time before Danny would get it—this time "it" was having his face driven into second base during lunch. He couldn't even defend himself because Abraham jumped him from behind. No one dared get involved because Abraham would never forget a face.

After school that day I was sure that I'd see Abraham. To get home I had to walk past this sculpture made of cedar blocks. It was right by the Bixler Street playground and my friends and I would pretend it was a space station and play in it. Now it looked scary. There were lots of shadowy spaces where Abraham could be perched. As I got closer my knees felt shivery and my heart started to race. I put my head down and sprinted by. If Abraham was there I didn't want to see him.

Part of my biggest fear was that Abraham would follow me to the apartment. Ever since I hit fourth grade I went home alone and had my own key which I wore under my jacket on a silver chain. I had visions of Abraham chasing me up the back porch and to our door. I'd try to outrun him but he'd grab me from behind right when I almost had the key in the lock. I had reason to think he might be around because he had been seen on our

street. My best friend Mary, who lived two buildings down, said he actually came into their apartment one day to see her older sister, Cassandra. They listened to some loud bangy music and smoked a weird cigarette. Mary told her Mom and she was really mad. Cassandra got grounded and couldn't even come sit on the curb after dinner.

Abraham became such a terror in my mind that every time I was outside I'd feel panicky. I was sure that every person I met on the sidewalk was going to be Abraham. All I could think about at school was the walk home. I always felt pretty safe once I was in the school building, though. That was until that Friday morning in Mrs. Funk's room.

I was sitting at my desk working a long division problem when the principal came on the P.A. This had only happened once before the boiler burst and we got to go home early because the heat went out. But this announcement was different: "ABRAHAM FELDMAN, IF YOU ARE STILL IN THE BUILDING LEAVE IMMEDIATELY." Mrs. Funk went to the door and locked it from the inside. I sat at my desk focusing on the yellowy grains of the wood. The thought of Abraham in our halls, walking past my locker made me feel numb. What if he peeked in the window on our door and decided to come in? I don't know when he left but we went to lunch at the regular time. I couldn't eat.

I wasn't the only one so afraid of Abraham. My friend Gita lived across the street from him. He lived with his mother in a largish brownstone with a rickety porch that needed to be painted. I never actually met Mrs. Feldman but one day I was at the grocery store with Mom and I saw this slight woman pushing a cart by herself. Her face was tired looking and she had to be Mrs. Feldman. Gita had told me that one night Abraham was yelling at Mrs. Feldman so loudly that Gita's Dad could hear her screaming from across the street. He called the police but Abraham didn't get arrested. Gita was sure that Abraham knew her Dad was the one who called. She knew Abraham would get them back. She was so scared that she wouldn't even leave the lobby of her building. Her Mom changed her work hours so she could be home with Gita after school. I wished my Mom could do that but I knew she couldn't and I didn't want to ask. She'd just get all upset like the day when she came home and I hadn't

chained the door. So I kept my Abraham Feldman stories to myself or discussed him with my friends. It became morbid, like an obsession to assure myself that Abraham was going to get me.

Besides worrying about locking doors and that kind of stuff, Mom was always afraid that I was bored. She had to work and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. Every Saturday she'd take me to the Blackstone Library and I'd check out tons of books. When I came home from school I could read, watch television or play with the cats. I didn't really mind being by myself because I could find things to do. What bothered me was that no one would be around to help me if Abraham got in. I'd call Mom at work a lot just to have time when someone could be listening if Abraham came. I would have gone over to my friends' apartment, but Mom wasn't too keen on that. Too many kids in our neighborhood got into trouble after school. Jeremy Brown started running with the bicycle stealing gang and his sister was caught shoplifting at Walgreen's. Mom wouldn't let me run around the city like that. Any of my after-school activities had to be planned. That's why I was in a pottery class at the Hyde Park Art Studio.

Every Thursday afternoon about five of us would walk with two major streets to cross. The walk was the worst because we had to go past alleys and backyard garages where Abraham might be hanging out. But once we got to the studio I felt secure. The pottery studio was in the basement of a red brick corner building. The cement walls were painted in a chunky cream color and bare lightbulbs with little cages hung from the ceiling. The windows were half windows because part of the room was underground. They had iron bars on them. I liked being in the basement because the sound of the creaking pottery wheels drowned out any other noises. even when it was raining outside or a bunch of police cars were going by we couldn't hear anything.

Mr. Sterchi let us do anything we wanted. He had real long hair tied back in a ponytail and would sit at his own wheel and work while we were left to our own devices. I was working on a pottery man with hair made of clay run through a cheese grater. Pottery Man was like Mr. Potato Head because his head and body were one big clump. He really didn't have a neck or

arms. On this particular Thursday he finally came out of the kiln and was ready to be taken home. I had mixed white and brown glaze together and it baked on him like a coat of toasted marshmallow. His hair looked like coconut shreds. He was going to be a surprise for my Mom. I couldn't wait to get home and give it to her. I could just see her finding a "special place" for him on the dining room table. I was so excited that I forgot about Abraham. Plus, Rachel's mother was walking us home because it had been getting dark early.

But by the end of class, Rachel's mother had not come. Mr. Sterchi told us to wait outside because he had to clean up. It was a fall afternoon and the streetlights had already come on. We stood in front of the studio waiting. The people walking by seemed to get scarier and scarier. One guy in a black trench coat came over to Rachel and asked her the way to the nearest bus stop. She talked to him and everything. I wouldn't have. My stomach began to burn. Where was Rachel's mother? The stores and buildings around us were locking up. No one seemed too interested in a bunch of kids hanging around the streets of Chicago near dinner time.

Finally, Rachel decided to start walking. What would I do now? I knew that Mom would be furious if I left without waiting for Rachel's mother. I took a ride home from school one day with a lady from our apartment building and got yelled at for about a week. And Mom was going to be mad enough that Rachel's mother didn't come like she said she would. I decided to stay. Rachel and the others crossed the street and headed toward home. I sat down on the curb and just watched them until all I could see was Rachel's red ski jacket. In the back of my mind I knew that Mom would worry when I didn't come home. I imagined her pulling up in our Dodge Colt and leaning over to open the passenger door. "Get inside, it's cold," she'd say. Then we'd drive home the long way past Woodlawn Park. But then I panicked. What if Mom wasn't home and a babysitter didn't have a car to come get me? What if the babysitter didn't even know where I was? What if Mom forgot? What if Abraham Feldman knew I was alone and found me outside the studio which was now closed?

I decided to make a run for it and catch up to the other kids. I tucked Pottery Man under my arm and ran across 52nd Street.

As I moved down the street, I began to see dangerous shapes down the alleys. The open dumpster looked like a person. An abandoned car with the wheels stolen looked like it might have someone sitting in it. The rattle of a barbed wire fence sounded like footsteps. At the intersection of Kenwood and Dorchester a car pulled up very slowly. I thought of the perverts who took little girls into their cars and drove off. I ran faster. Pottery Man thudded in my armpit. He thumped along with my pulse which was getting quicker and quicker. Come on. You're down two blocks. Keep going. The rises in the sidewalk were slowing me down. Faster. You're almost there. There's the school in the distance. Come on. Here's the Patton's house with the pretty stained glass window in the foyer. A figure flinched in the lobby of a brick three-flat. Just someone who lives there. Don't be silly. Nothing to be afraid of. Think of the apartment. Think of the apartment. Think of Mom. Come on...

"Where are running to?"

I didn't have to turn around to know who that voice belonged to.

"I asked you where you're going'."

I had no choice but to stop. I turned around and saw Abraham standing under an elm tree nonchalantly smoking a cigarette. In a swoop I realized that all of the houses on the street were dark.

"You. What's that you got hidden under yer arm?" Abraham demanded.

"Nothing. Jussa piece of, of pottery," I gasped. My voice sounded too high and my breathing seemed to have stopped.

"Pottery? I bet you got some money in there. Don't your Mommy give you money to make a phone call in case you get in trouble?" Abraham took a step from the shadow of the tree. He lifted the cigarette to his lips and I could see him wince as he sucked on it.

"Sorry," I said, making a motion to continue on my way. I tried to move but my feet felt like dead weights. I was going to die and I knew it.

"Don't leave yet. Did I tell you to leave? Geez." He stepped up closer. His eyes were heavy and dull like the ones of the shark in my book Monsters of the Deep. But the book and home seemed like something forgotten world. Pottery Man's clay hair

dug into my armpit like nails. Abraham was only a foot away from me now. I could smell the smoke on his denim jacket.

"Gimme that thing," he said, pointing at Pottery Man.

"Really, it's nothing. It's for my Mom." My fingers had no feeling and my hands tingled. "You..."

Abraham slapped me with such force that I felt the backs of his knuckles on my skin. A stinging pain ran across my cheek and to the other side of my face. My eyes burned and I couldn't stop blinking.

"Listen kid. I'll give you one more chance to hand it over." Abraham clutched my arm so tightly that it almost snapped.

I don't remember what happened next, and I couldn't tell the policeman, but suddenly Pottery Man was on the ground in three big chunks. All I could think of was how his hair looked like fingernail clippings on the sidewalk. I looked up and saw thick blood coming out of Abraham's nose and dripping to his chin. His lips were all stretched out and puffy. I ran. I didn't know where I was going or why I ran. My head roared. I didn't feel the pavement and my jacket flew behind me like a pair of wings.

"Stop. Stop!!!"

The dullness had spread through my entire body and I had no feeling. I couldn't remember what it was like to walk. I hurtled through the air.

"It's me! Stop!"

I rolled my head around like a doll and let my eyes focus.

"Stop! Stop!"

Mom's Dodge Colt pulled along beside me. I moved toward it in a haze.

"What are you doing? Gita's mother called and said she saw you running down the street by yourself. Where are the other kids?" Mom's voice drifted by around my head.

"Pottery Man. On the street. Abraham. He's coming. Keep moving. Run," I heard myself say.

"Abraham? Look, he's not... your face." Mom touched a spot on my cheek. "What happened to your face? Oh my God. Abraham Feldman did that..." Mom started crying. "Abraham Feldman hit my baby."

The police did not find Abraham that night. He must have

seen Mom's car after I started to run off. That's what they said anyways. I slept in Mom's bed that night and didn't have to go to school the next day. Mom took the day off. She called up Grandma in Florida and started crying again. Grandma wanted to talk to me and asked if I was alright. I said I didn't know. All I could see was Abraham stepping toward me with those dead shark eyes. Danny's eyes looked like little prunes when he was crying. Little puffy prunes.

The doorbell rang. Mom answered it and it was the policeman. She shut the door, unfastened the chain, and let him in.

Afternoon. I've got some news for you on your case, Ma'am," he said. "You might want her to , ah, leave..." I got up without being asked and went to my bedroom.

"Seems like Feldman met up with your daughter when he was waiting for a connection," the policeman said. I sat on my yellow ribcord listening to every word.

"A connection?" Mom asked.

Yes. We had a suspicion that he was working with a drug dealer in one of the southside gangs. Apparently he missed the connection when he ran off after your daughter hit him," the policeman said.

Hit him? I didn't remember hitting anyone. But Pottery Man's body was on the ground in three huge chunks.

"How do you know? " Mom asked. "I mean how do you know that's why he was there and why can't you find him now?"

"We did find him. His body was strewn on the tracks of Illinois Central at Randolph Street."

Just like Pottery Man's, I thought. And then I started screaming.