

That Hard Thing

by
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"Just feel that nice hard thing down there. Isn't it nice?"

"I don't want to feel any hard thing, anywhere," I said. "You told me we were coming out here to the hallway so you could hear me play the harmonica on my own without the noise from the rest of the class. You didn't tell me you wanted me to feel some hard thing or other. I'm going back inside the class. You lied."

This happened at the North Light Boys' Club, although girls were allowed to go there, too. We went there sometimes after school and on Saturdays. You could take courses like cooking and crafts and music. Music was how to play the harmonica and the teacher was a short, fat, man. I didn't like him but my mother said that was probably because I always had sisters teaching me up until now. .

When we walked home from music class that day I said to my friend, Dorothy, "Did Mr. D. ever take you outside so he could hear how you play the harmonica on your own?"

"Yeah," Dorothy grinned. "He didn't want to hear me play. He wanted me to touch something he called that nice hard thing."

"Did you?"

"Well, I started to and then decided it was stupid and he told me to go back inside and I would never play the harmonica good anyway. Who cares?"

"I'm telling my father," I told her with all the determination of an angry nine-year-old.

When I got home my parents were waiting for me to have supper. We usually ate at 5:30 p.m. sharp, but sometimes, like when I was at North Light Boys' Club for something or other, we ate at six. I took off my hat and coat, kissed my father and said, "Daddy, something funny happened in harmonica class today. Mr. D. took me outside to hear me play on my own, apart from the others in my class, but he didn't. He wanted me to feel some hard thing. I told him no and I went back inside the classroom. He asked Dorothy the same thing earlier. Why would he want us to do that?"

My normally pale father went even whiter, looked at my mother, and then he said to me, "You never have to go back to that class, Cassie. I'm not sure I want you back at that club at all. Eat your supper. Kate, I'm going over there right now to take care of this." He left his food uneaten on his plate, something we weren't allowed to do ever, and I got scared and my baby brother Donnie began to cry. My father put on his coat and left.

I started to cry and my mother said, "It's all right, Cassie. Now eat your food and play with Donnie until he feels better. Daddy will take care of it all." She looked kind of funny, too. I almost thought she was crying a little.

My father came home from the club later. He talked with my mother in whispers in the kitchen while he finished the food she had kept warm in the oven. No more was said about that hard thing. My parents decided that I could go back to the club because I pleaded with them that I wanted to finish the crafts I was working on. Dorothy went too, but we both dropped out of harmonica class and actually we didn't see Mr. D. there at all. Somebody else was taking his classes.

About two weeks later, I bounded into the living room for supper, almost late because it was my row's week at school to clean up the classroom and I had also helped one of the students who was having a hard time with his reading. When I got home I found Mr. D. talking to my father and mother. I suddenly felt very scared.

"Ah, here's dear Catherine," he slithered. "I've just been telling your mother and father how mistaken you are about what happened. The only hard thing I ever asked you to touch was the harmonica, wasn't it?"

I looked at my mother and father and my voice shook, "I don't lie, Mr. D. I'm not perfect, but I don't lie." I remembered the time I once had when I was six years old and how I couldn't go to sleep until I had gone back downstairs and told both my parents about the lie. Lying just took too much out of me to ever do it again.

My father looked at me, at my mother, and then at Mr. D. He said, "Mr. D., thank you for coming. We appreciate your visit. There might be a lot of other things about Cassie's behaviour that we don't always like but one thing I can tell you is that she never lies. I believe what she said. My charge still stands. And now if you will please excuse us, we have our supper to eat, and we'd like you to leave." Mr. D. started to sputter, but my father moved toward the door and opened it and finally he left.

We went into the kitchen and I started to set the table and my mother began to put out the food and my father looked out of the kitchen window at the big tree in the yard for a while, and then took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes and I realized he was crying.

I started to cry and then I ran to him and hugged him and said, "But, Daddy, I did tell the truth, really, I did."

"I know, Cassie," he said. "I know you did. I believe you. Life is sometimes hard for people who don't lie but I hope you'll always be honest no matter what that costs you. I'm sad because I won't always be there to help you when people try to hurt you. I'll do it for as long as I can but eventually your mom and I won't be there to help. That's hard for me to accept. But that's a long time from now, I'm sure, and in the meanwhile your mother and I will always help whenever we can." He looked at my mother who had her back to us, went over and patted Donnie on the head, and then said, "Now let's eat."

He put his handkerchief away, and sat in his seat, and I helped Donnie make the sign of the cross, and fold his little hands, and we said grace before meals. As I began to eat I knew in a way I had never known before that Mr. D's "hard thing", which I still really didn't understand, was by no means the hardest thing that life would eventually ask of me, or of my parents, and probably not even of baby Donnie.