

Younger than Seventeen

By D.C. Blair

"Martha Scott, you'll never amount to anything."

The voice came back to me clearly now, amid the titter of the classroom.

I remembered looking at her adolescent face lowered, the bright eyes half closed, lifting for a fleeting moment.

"Martha Scott, what is to become of you?"

A different voice calling as the screen door banged shut with a clatter and we walked to the dusty road that would take us to the Saturday afternoon movies.

But whatever became of Martha Scott?

The question burned within me.

I had no right to know of course, not after all these years.

She said we would never see each other again when I left, although I had said otherwise.

I remembered the last time I saw her, the tears flowing down her cheeks.

We were, after all, lovers. And we were only 16.

Dad had the promotion to another province and I had little choice at that age but to follow.

It was funny how we had talked of being married and looked forward so much to having kids.

We felt we were old enough then, only waiting time out for what was acceptable, but when confronted with reality, I followed it.

She would be a perfect mother.

I always had said that.

She was quiet and shy, sometimes to a fault, but as we spent more and more time together we both revealed all of our secrets and I would never let her go.

I had said that too.

Her eyes always were bright, except when I saw her last.

I could almost smell the faint scent of her perfume as I stepped down from train onto the old concrete platform, wrinkled now with cracks running through it. The station hadn't changed much.

Inside the open waiting room were the same old wooden benches and it was damp and cold as the brick still held the chill from the night before.

I was home, and yet had left it a hundred miles away with Maggie.

What was I doing here anyway?

Maybe it wasn't Martha Scott at all.

Perhaps it was seeking a part of my youth, the happy time in my life, now lost. Maybe it was just to see the old house.

I found a row of lockers, a new addition to the station, threw my bag inside one, and pocketed the key.

The door to the adjoining restaurant rang with a familiar chime as I opened it, and at once I was greeted with the aroma of fresh coffee.

I ordered one as I sat at the counter on one of the swivel stools.

Swinging halfway around, I glanced at an empty booth, the farthest one at the back. It was our booth.

We sat there for hours on end over a Coke and sometimes when Dad gave me an extra allowance for a special chore, I would order chips and gravy.

Later we ordered coffee, feeling grown up.

It was usually as quiet as it was now.

The small town didn't see much traffic.

As I rose, I dropped a quarter under the saucer and something came back to what the value had been that one time.

It was something I spent hours searching empty bottles for.

The main street was as I had remembered.

There was a tall, modern glass and steel building on the corner of Church and Manchester and a few old ones seemed to have completely vanished but otherwise it was the same.

I took Church leading east a few blocks until the worn pavement turned to dirt.

My right foot kicked at it and I watched the dust fly in a shower and a gentle breeze carry the small cloud of it away.

Turning down a sidestreet, it was not long before I was in front of the three storey house with the steeple over the room on the right.

That had been my bedroom.

The sounds of brothers and sisters came back to me, shouting voices banging on the doors, waking the whole household, if not the neighborhood, exclaiming Christmas was here.

The patter of our bare feet running down the stairs.

The smells of back bacon and eggs frying.

There was the time I had

the fever when I was very small and mother held me all night.

I remember the overwhelming feeling of contentment and security while my young feverish mind raced in delirium.

When it broke the next morning, mother let go of me and I sank under the familiar sheets, feeling as if freed into the world anew.

It all came back to me now.

It was so vivid in my mind that I almost raced to the house to fling open the door and sit once more at the grey arborite table, hearing the tap of the stir spoon on the glass bowl as my mother mixed a fresh batch of cookie dough.

"You looking for someone?"

I hadn't noticed the man approach at my side.

"No, I mean yes. Do you live here?"

He nodded. A red shock of hair stood slightly above mine.

We were about the same age.

He reminded me of Red Jacobs, but I knew he had drowned in the lake the year before we left.

"Who you looking for?"

"Do you know a Martha Scott?"

His brows furrowed, then his head tilted and he squinted through the bright sunlight.

"There's a Scott living off number 28. Older couple."

"That would be her parents."

He nodded again, then shook his head.

"I don't know of any daughter."

Of course not, I thought. She's probably married and a thousand miles away.

She always wanted to be a stewardess.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked instead.

"Couple of years."

We chatted briefly and when I told him I was born in his house he seemed interested and asked if I wanted to come in.

I declined, knowing that seeing the outside was the height of my memories.

Inside would be changes, and I wanted to preserve the appearance as I remembered it.

I cut across the field on the way to her house.

Dad and I had flown the kite he built many times here.

A hundred yards away was the small pond that we skated and played hockey on in

winter and where I had lost my front tooth.

I had felt a little proud losing that tooth, representing the mark of a terrific hockey player.

I walked down a small gully into a clump of trees abundant with green foliage.

Walking through it, I felt her warmth suddenly beside me, her soft hair falling around her as she laid her head on the long grass under the large maple tree.

A day just as today.

Reaching around her to hold her close.

The first time I kissed her it was late at night, standing on her porch.

It had been weeks after dating her, afraid that if I tried before it would frighten her and she would stop seeing me.

That night I tried to clumsily shake her hand, but instead she held it steady, and used it to pull herself up and our lips met.

My arms held her and I could hear my heart pounding in my ears.

Then my knees started to unexplainably tremble and I reluctantly broke away, afraid they would buckle.

I could have stayed in contact at least, but I had felt it was over and it would be easier to make a clean break. I could have come back sooner but each year I put it off for another.

Perhaps if I had tried to stay we would be together right now with a houseful of kids like we had always dreamed of.

Then I met Maggie. Until the accident we had always been happy.

Maybe she was right that it was the real reason we broke up, although I had always said it wasn't.

Children seem to bind a marriage more than without though, and as the marriage deteriorated I found myself thinking of her more and more.

We tried to reconcile once, but the love building in my head grew until I no longer could kiss the one without thinking of the other.

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you," I had said, and we kissed until our lips were numb.

As I came out into the field again, there was no young girl's arm around my waist nor mine around slim shoulders as we walked.

Now there was only a wonder of why things happened as they did and a wish that somethings would never

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progress, that complete happiness in a moment would never die.

I came out onto the country road and realized I had forgotten the church there.

Her house was another half mile away and I could see the road yards down that would take me there.

I stopped in front of the red brick structure.

The iron gate went to the left and the right of the old building and then cut to the back where I knew the graveyard was.

My mind was suddenly full of doubts.

What would I say to her parents?

I never felt they had like me, especially her father, seemingly always suspicious and I always felt guilty before him after the first time we had laid under that tall maple tree.

What if by chance she returned home for a visit? What if she brought her husband and children?

I couldn't imagine that. Would her thoughts be like mine or would she think it humorless to see me again?

I walked through the open gate and saw the sign over the boarded doors that used to open and close so frequently on Sunday mornings.

I slowly walked around to the back, knowing Red lay there.

There weren't many new stones.

Old man McKennely passed away 10 years ago and I was surprised he lasted that long.

Red's stone was just as I remembered, except the wet mound of earth was now flat and covered in long grass as if it had never been dug at all.

There was a pretty monument of an angel near his that I didn't recognize, and I took a few steps to see who it was.

A sudden chill on the warm day ran through me as I read the name.

My eyes read on and as they did, my nostrils flared and sudden tears brimmed the lids.

I fell to my knees and held my sides as I read and re-read the inscription.

"Martha Scott, Beloved daughter of Hazel and Ralph. Born 1940. Died 1956 with child."

The warm breeze stirred my hair and the old fresh smell of the country came back to me.

I was close to her again.