*PUSHING UP*

I first came to know Vicky-Lyn Cleary through the pawnshop. One spring day, she came into my shop asking if I was looking for a hard-working, loyal and dedicated employee. I guessed she was a hair short of twenty. She was a pretty girl with long blonde hair and expressive blue eyes that hardened with determination. What she lacked in experience she made up for with effort. Vicky-Lyn and I hit it off right away, and she worked for me for the better part of four years. We became close, well as close as a black man in Mississippi in the early eighties could be with a much younger white woman. My wife thought it was my maturity and grey hair that prompted her to confide in me and seek out my advice. I’m not saying she took it. I soon learned to bite my tongue as it became apparent that she was determined to blaze her own trail. Most days working with Vicky-Lyn were great; she brought just what this aging black man needed to get excited again about coming into work. There were days when she would become quiet; her eyes empty of their usual life. I usually could pull her back with a joke or funny story. A man gets a sense of things some times and on these days I thought that she was weighed down by a ghost or two in her closet.

When she announced her plans to marry Billy Mitchell, I had to speak my mind. You see a pawnbroker comes across all kinds of people. The recession had been hard on many people in Biloxi. This was before Mississippi legalized gambling and the tourist boom. Back then, all of the fun things folks liked to do had to be done in secret. At the pawnshop, you soon get a sense about people. Some people you meet are well raised and just down on their luck. Others like Billy Mitchell have an evilness as dark as the deepest depths of Biloxi Bay. You could see it in his eyes; they were constantly shifting crazily like the fire beneath the kettle. Billy had been in a few times trying to pawn stuff that I was sure he had stolen. When I refused to lend against the stuff, he became irate and loud. My Daddy used to say that kids like Billy were trouble as soon as they were out of diapers.

So what did Vicky Lyn Cleary see in Billy? I don’t know. He was tall, and I suppose good-looking enough, kind of like you would describe a farm animal. That’s an attractive cow or a good looking hog. Some women I figure are attracted to men with character flaws. Maybe it was a kind of reclamation project. If she was thinking that, then this was as futile as a cat chasing its tail. It had been two years since the wedding when a crying Vicky-Lyn came to see me on a stormy day in October 1980, and I knew it must have something to do with Billy.

I closed early that day. There wasn’t going to be much business with a hurricane- like storm hitting the gulf coast so hard. Biloxi was known for its storms; the kind the newscasters liked to show with trees being bent sideways by the wind. I brought Vicky-Lyn into the back room and gave her a hug and a box of tissues to dry her tears. I didn’t rush her. She needed time to get it out. I thought back to what I knew had happened since the wedding over two years ago. I had heard through the grapevine that Billy had moved his stuff into her house. This was the small clapboard house her mother left to her only child when she passed. Back in 1976, word around town was that Vicky-Lyn’s father was a drunk and the type to beat his wife. At least that’s what people said up until he disappeared. No one had much to say about what might have happened to him. It didn’t seem like anyone cared enough to ask the question.

 Shortly after the wedding she had come to thank me for everything and to tell me that she no longer needed the job. That spark was in her eyes, she was happy. Billy had a job at the lumberyard and was going to take care of things. I would have cried horse-pucky at that point, but I knew love was blind.

When the tears abated, I asked her if she wanted to tell me what was upsetting her. She bravely pulled herself together and said, “Billy.” I kept a bottle of Kentucky bourbon for particularly stressful days and now pulled it out of the bottom drawer of my desk. Of course, I already knew much of the story. Everyone that could read a headline in the Sun Herald knew*. Local boy arrested in a string of armed robberies.* But that was old news, at least six months old. The mystery was what had brought her into my shop today. Pouring us both a stiff one, I nodded for her to continue.

“He lost his job at the lumber mill after we had been married two months. Ever since then he’s been either angry and drunk or drunk and angry.” She said in between sniffles.

I resisted the temptation to say, “I told you so,” or to interrupt in any way.

“He said he had it covered, but the money we saved from the wedding didn’t last long. When I tried to make a suggestion on where he could look for work he told me to mind my own business. Instead of finding a job he and his buddies would grab their shotguns and go hunting.”

At this point, she pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse. She had quit smoking when she worked for me. In answer to my questioning look, she explained that it calmed her nerves. I used the zippo on my desk to give her a light. The flame cast enough light in the dim backroom to show that Vicky-Lyn had changed for the worse in the past two years. Her hair looked like it hadn’t seen a brush in weeks, and the bags under her eyes had bags of their own. I could see what looked like blood splattered on her denim blouse.

“He started going out every night and coming home drunk and loud, demanding sex. He’d been running with that creep friend of his Owen Jackson. I knew they were up to no good.”She took a long drag from her cigarette, her hands trembling. I reached over and put my hand over hers to settle her down. “One night he came home with a bag of money. I guess it must have been close to a thousand dollars. He said he won it at poker in one of those illegal bars along the strip. He told me that we couldn’t put the money in the bank on account the revenue people would be attracted to it like bees to honey.”

“I didn’t fall off the turnip truck, so I didn’t believe him. The money took care of some bills and allowed me to buy some food. He went out again the next night and came home with more money. Then about a week later he came home angry saying that things hadn’t gone right for him. He said he was going to have to lay low for a while. I tried to get him to talk about it, but he told me to shut up. When I persisted, he pushed me up against the wall and said I should concentrate on being a better wife.”

“Trying to be helpful, I told him I was going to come visit you and ask about my old job, and that’s when he hit me. He slapped me across the face and shook me like a rag doll. He told me that I was finished working for that....well for you.”

I knew she’d beengoing to say nigger. I took a long drink. There was an awkward moment of silence. The sound of rain landing on the tin roof was the only sound breaking the silence.

“The next day he said he was sorry and told me that he loved me. He said everything was going to be alright. He and his buddies were working on something that would bring in real money. He still wasn’t working; leastways not at anything legal. Most days, he would sleep until noon and then his friends would come over and drink. That Owen guy would carry on like he was a ladies’ man. He was constantly putting his hands on me right in front of Billy, who would just laugh as I squirmed away. Later in the evening they’d all go out, and Billy wouldn’t come home until early morning. By that time, I knew not to ask too many questions. If he came home with money, then all would be fine. If he didn’t then, I’d try to stay out of his way. He still managed to get his licks in, if I didn’t have the right booze in the house or if he wanted something different for dinner.”

“When he saw that I had started smoking again he got angry. I laughed at the irony of having a few cigarettes compared to a new bottle of whiskey every day. He hit me really hard that day and then used my cigarette on my arms and legs to teach me a lesson.”

At this point I had to break in, pouring us both a refill, “If he hurt you why didn’t you run or call the police?”

“I don’t know. I guess I felt embarrassed and that somehow I had brought all this on myself. As for calling the cops, he had friends in the sheriff’s department. They’ve been to our house. He would just get out and take it out on me.”

“You know what happened next, it was in all of the papers. The Biloxi police came to the house one day and took him away. This time he had really done it. In robbing the gas station in D’Iberville, he beat that clerk with his gun and almost killed him.”

She paused at this point to ground out her cigarette in the ashtray. “We had the cash for me to bail him out, but I didn’t. I let him rot there. Do you know that I never once showed up at his trial? He kept calling and calling. I guess he told the cops that he was at home with me on the night of the robbery. A cop came by the house and asked about his alibi. I said I didn’t know where Billy spent his evenings. The cop asked about the money. Apparently there was close to $10,000 from the string of robberies. I said I didn’t have two dimes to rub together or else I would have bailed him out. I was praying that he would be found guilty and be sent away for a long time.”

“When he got sentenced, and was put in Parchment Penitentiary, I never once went to visit him. I couldn’t stomach looking at him. All this time he let me believe he was gambling when he was knocking off gas stations.”

I nodded my head that I understood, but I really didn’t. I’m not sure anyone could, unless they had gone through it. I watched her as she drank her bourbon, “You know I called a couple of times during the trial to check up on you.”

“I know you did. I got your messages. It might be late, but I’m here now. You have always been a caring man and a good friend. You tried to give me advice about Billy, and I was too stupid to take it. I wish I could turn back time.” Her eyes started to moisten up.

“Why don’t you finish the story?” I said, not wanting to lose the momentum.

“Well today’s October 14th. It’s been six months since the cell doors closed on Billy. When I heard they had given him twelve years I thanked God. I wouldn’t have to face him for at least ten years. Maybe if I was lucky another inmate would stick a shiv in his ear, and I would be done with him. I have a friend at the courthouse who told me about his appeal. Even then, I never thought he’d get out. When the gas station clerk recanted his testimony, and his lawyer found someone else who was in the area that night who matched the description, I knew it was only a matter of time.

“I thought about making a run for it. Then I thought about my Mom and what she’d had to endure. I used to lie awake at night listening to her crying, begging my Daddy to stop. She stuck it out and never ran away. That gave me strength.”

“I made up my mind that I was not going to let Billy hurt me again. The people in Parchment were good enough to warn me this morning about his release. His buddy Owen was there to pick him up. I sat at the kitchen table trying to summon my nerve. I figured that his spell in Parchment gave him lots of time to get as angry as a hornet.”

“I chain smoked and worked my way through a six pack. A lot had changed in me from the time I’d said ‘I Do.’ He’d seen me as the good wife, the wife who, like a dog, was ready to please the master. I decided he needed to see what his cruelty had brought out of me.”

“By 2 o’clock this afternoon, the rains came along with the howling wind. I sat in the rocker on the porch, my eyes waiting for the car to turn onto the gravel lane. I was getting a chill, so I grabbed a woollen blanket from the hall and wrapped it around me. As I waited, I looked at the wilting daisies in the flower garden. My mother and I had planted them. This was my home and I wasn’t going to give it up.”

“I didn’t have to wait long. I stayed there by the door as the car drove up our long lane. As he got out of the car, I heard him say to Owen that he best be leaving.”

“Hey, Vicky-Lyn baby, I’m home!” he called out, his voice barely audible over the rain. He was wearing that cheap suit his lawyer bought him for the trial. “How you been baby? It’s been a long time.” He approached the porch~~,~~ “Why didn’t you return my calls? We could have used that money for bail.”He appeared to grow more confident the closer he got to the steps.

“You best be turning around and getting out of here.”

“Why, this is my home too baby? I live here; you’re my wife. Or do you need a little reminding of that?” He climbed the first step to the porch. There was something about the tone of his voice. It was threatening. He took another step closer.

 “That’s close enough Billy. This is my final warning. Get off my property.”

“Alright, then just let me get my clothes and I’ll go.”

“I burned all your things; there is nothing here for you.” I said with a resolve that I hadn’t thought was in me.

“What about the money you were holding for me?” As he said this, he climbed the last step and was standing menacingly in front of me.

“There’s one thing of yours I didn’t throw away.”

 As he reached out to grab me, he said something about teaching me a lesson. I didn’t hear the rest from the sound of his shotgun blowing him clear off the porch.”

I figured a story like that was worth another drink. As I poured, I contemplated what a wise old man should say about someone who blows their spouse into oblivion. “So is he dead?”

“He was after I put the second round of buckshot in his brain.”

After a pause to let this sink in I asked, “What are you going to do now Vicky-Lyn?”

“I’m going to the police station to make a statement about what I did. I came here to tell you that you were right. I’m not sure what will happen to me, but it was important to tell you why I did what I did.”

I saw that same steely resolve she had shown so many years earlier. “You’re a brave woman Vicky-Lyn. Are you sure you want to go to the police with that story?”I thought she should have a lawyer. At minimum she needed a friend.

“There is something that’s weighted me down all these years. The truth about my father never came out.” She looked up at me as she finished her drink. You see, I couldn’t take my mother’s cries any longer. I hit him with a cast iron skillet when he was hurting her. I hit him, hit him and hit him again. I didn’t stop until I was sure he wouldn’t hurt her again. This time I want everyone to know what happened,” she replied as she got up and walked out of the store.