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My First Job
By Faith Peterson

I remember clearly how hard the water droplets struck the freshly mown grass of the cemetery. Before me lay the coffin, a rich, dark brown one, holding a person that would never again walk this earth. A canopy was set up above the newly dug grave, and it kept the rain off of both the living and this one who had departed. There were several familiar faces at the funeral and also at the committal that came after. Our community was closely knit. When someone died, everyone felt the same pain and they helped each other through the tragedy. I rubbed my hand across the smooth, polished wooden surface of the casket. Memories flooded back as I touched it and they overwhelmed me. Some rain drops managed to land upon my face and I hoped that my tears would be mistaken for them.

Life will never be the same. Those words stung and they swirled around my mind over and over and over again, each time more painful than the last. I closed my eyes, allowing one more tear to slide down my cheek.

I shall go back about a week before that mournful day. It happened on the fifth of June, when I took a job as a cashier at Tom's Country Store after my first year of college. Phineas, my best friend, worked there as well, and he was the one who helped me get a job there. I'd never been

employed, as the unemployment issues we were having prevented me from getting a job before. I would say that I was lucky in finally finding an occupation, but after what followed in the first week, I find it difficult to say that now.

It was the first day of my job and I rode my bike to the store early that morning, eating a raspberry muffin along the way. I arrived at six and the sun had not yet risen. The air had a mild bite to it, but I knew that it would warm up with time. I chained my bike to the rack that was just outside the store doors and entered shortly after.

I had never been so excited in my life, nor so nervous. Phin knew this and he consoled me after I took my place at a register and started up the monitor. I told him that I had little experience with jobs like this and was somewhat afraid that I would make a mistake in something I did. He said that everyone made mistakes and that I shouldn't be worried. That still didn't assure me. He sighed deeply.

"Come on, Kailyn," he said. "You're special and you've got skills that others don't. You'll do just fine."

"You know that I've never had a lot of confidence in my abilities."

"Trust yourself and don't worry. I'm here if you ever need anything, all right?"

"All right."

He went back to his register to start up his computer there and he took his time punching in codes. I turned back to my console and flipped the light of my check-out aisle number on. The number two on the box in front of my aisle lit up instantly. I turned around and saw Phin carrying some wooden boards to the end of his aisle. They were about the length of a baseball bat and were only four dollars per board. I returned my attention to my monitor.

It wasn't long until we had our first customers.

People came and went. Most of these people I knew. There were only a couple of individuals I hadn't known before that day.

It was around eleven in the morning when my manager, Joe Nichols, helped me at the register. A canister of Pringles didn't ring through correctly, so I called him over. He had his white sleeves rolled halfway up his dark arms, ready for when a problem surfaced. When the error was squared away, he looked over at me.

"You messed it up pretty good," he teased. "What did you do?"

I rolled my eyes and smiled.

He shook his head, still grinning at me and he headed to the front desk, which was located beside the front doors of the store.

In the evening, a young girl, Nellie, and Karl, her father, came in. As they passed by my register, Karl turned to me.

"Nellie here's just finished second grade," he said, beaming down at his daughter. "We're going to celebrate tonight."

Nellie's large blue eyes shifted their attention to a particular aisle and they somehow widened even further than they were previously. She bounced at her father's side and pointed to the section of the store that she was obsessed with. That was where the candies were. Karl took his daughter by the hand and led her down that aisle and they eyed each item carefully, no doubt wary of the prices.

I'd known their family for years and they were close to my parents. Karl had gone to high school at the same time my father had and they were both on the football team. The Thompsons were some of the sweetest people you'd ever meet in a small place like Georgetown, Kansas.

Phineas stood there at his register, occasionally flashing a friendly smile at me, to which I responded in like manner. We had known each other since kindergarten and had been best friends ever since. He had given me that same smirk since childhood and, to this day, I adore its warm, inviting appearance.

On our break that day, we talked. It didn't matter what we talked about. We just liked to listen to each other. I remember that we somehow got to talking about my unpredictable cellphone.

"Just yesterday," I told him, holding my phone up to his face, "this blasted piece of technology refused to send any text messages to anyone."

"Are all of your contacts with AT&T?" he asked.

"No. Most of them are with Verizon like me."

"Well, Kailyn" he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "I don't know what's going on. You might want to get a new phone."

"You know I don't have that kind of money."

"That's right." He grinned. "I'll buy you that new iPhone thing that's going around."

"You know you don't have that kind of money."

We both chuckled. Our laughing caught Joe's attention. He looked at us and pointed to our registers. Break was over. Phin and I headed back to our respective places and waited.

Not long after, in walked two men. The older of the two was clean-shaven and he wore a tweed jacket and hiking boots. His blond hair was combed neatly to the left side of his head. The man had to have been in his late forties, or even early fifties. The younger of the two men had a shadow of facial hair around the base of his jaw. He wore a sports coat, white sneakers, jeans, and a ball cap that covered his dark, disheveled hair. He could not have been any older than

twenty-five, for sure. I made eye contact with one of them briefly as they both approached the deli. It was about five in the evening.

Adelita entered sometime after the two men did. She was Chilean; had graying, black hair tied up in a simple ponytail; and she wore a modest, yellow summer dress with orange flowers displayed upon the front. She approached me just as she walked in.

“Need something quick and easy for dinner,” she said. “I don’t have time to drive out to Kansas City and back.” That was two hours away.

I watched her scuttle off down one aisle, searching the shelves quickly. I glanced down at my wrist watch. Fourteen minutes passed six. I didn’t have to leave until about seven. Phin and I were going to see *World War Z* that night at the theater after work. I wasn’t entirely sold on the zombie genre, but Phin insisted, so I said I’d go with him.

At half passed six, I was sending Adelita on her way. She placed a gallon of milk on the conveyor belt first. Then she tossed on two packages of raw hamburger and finally a bag of salt. It all rang up to thirty dollars and fifty-nine cents. She paid with cash amounting to forty dollars so I gave her the change she was due. I bagged the groceries for her and was just about to say “Have a nice day.” But before I could say anything, my gaze slid passed her and I saw Phin. He stood there frozen, eyes wide and skin pasty white. I’d have sworn that he’d seen a ghost. I looked at Karl and Nellie, who were at the front of the check-out lane, and behind them were two men. They both held guns and the younger man had the father and daughter at gunpoint. Nellie screamed.

“Shut her up!” the younger one said to Karl, waving his pistol at him. “Or I will!”

Karl hushed his daughter and the two men gestured for them to sit down. They both sat on the floor at the end of the check-out aisle and Nellie jumped into her father’s lap, clutching to her

father's shoulder. Her large, blue eyes were filled with fear. Out of the corner of my vision, I could see Adelita looking passed me and slapping her hand over her mouth. Joe was standing by the main desk, looking on in as much horror as everyone else was.

"Open the cash register," the older one said smoothly, as if nothing was wrong.

Phin did not respond, his jaw set firmly in place and he crossed his arms across his chest. His eyes blazed, the gaze intense and I found I could hardly even look at him. If looks could kill, both of the criminals would have dropped dead right then and there.

"Kid," he said, almost apologetically, "you're going to open that for me."

He didn't budge, still glaring at both men and shaking his head. The younger one held his firearm to poor Nellie, who cried as soon as the weapon was raised to her forehead. Phin jerked forward suddenly, reaching out to her. He paused, looking briefly at the criminals. He complied, his hands shaking as he entered a code into his computer. The money drawer popped open. The older man grabbed the cash there and turned around. He gave me one hard stare, ominous in its appearance. He pointed to me next. My heart pounded in my chest as I stood there, feeling a rush of cold come over me.

"The money," the older one said. "*Now.*"

I just stared at my computer screen. I didn't know what to do. The younger one bit his lip and rushed over to me and held his gun in front of him, aiming it directly at me. I heard footsteps coming from behind at the other register.

"Don't you move!" I could only assume that the younger man was speaking to Phin. I can't even imagine the expression on his face when I was seized. "Don't move!"

The gun was pushed tightly into my side and I squealed.

"Take out the money," came the voice of the younger one. "Don't want anyone hurt, do you?"

I could already feel tears running down both sides of my face. I slowly reached out to the keyboard in front of the computer monitor and typed in my code.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the elder of the duo said to Joe at the main desk. “You stay right where you are.”

I opened my register drawer and the younger man stuffed all that was there into his sack. He turned his head.

“Don’t take your eyes off that kid!” he said to the other.

“What other kid?”

He turned, facing the opposite direction that I was.

“He was just there!” he shouted.

His head turned about quickly, his gun digging further into my side.

Suddenly, the lights went out and I could see nothing at first. My ponytail was pulled back and my head leaned upon the thief’s shoulder. I shrieked.

“None of that now,” he whispered into my ear.

I felt something hard hit my captor and I was on the ground. My forehead hit the floor first and I felt it swelling almost immediately. My hand instinctively reached to touch it, but it was far too sensitive already. I flipped my body around and scooted along the slippery, tiled floor, still holding my forehead. I thought I heard a struggle commence immediately after and could barely make out figures in the dark. My eyes began to adjust, but I still couldn’t see much. I heard a punch, and then another, and another. There was a bone-snapping *crack* in the dark and someone’s blood-curdling wail followed. The voice was that of a man, but I could not distinguish who it belonged to.

Three shots sounded. I jumped at the horrid noise and covered my ears as soon as the first one pierced the air. There was a shout and another blow was inflicted upon someone nearby. I felt something heavy crash to the floor and there was little more than that as I sat in the darkness.

The power was out for about ten minutes, but it felt more like an eternity. When the lights came back on, my eyes jumped across the room, looking at all of the other people there. Phin sat on the floor next, his shoulder dripping with blood. He was panting, leaning against the wall by the front desk and a wood board lay next to him. One of the two criminals was nearly at my feet, and I assumed that he was unconscious. Young Nellie stood nearby, looking upon a bloodied body that lie there on the ground and it did not move. She screamed. Once I realized who it was, I felt my stomach lurch.

Karl lie there, unmoving. Phin crawled over to him and carefully placed two of his fingers just underneath his jaw. He shook his head, hovering his hand above Karl's mouth.

"Is he-" Adelita began, covering Nellie's eyes. She did not finish the question that no one dared to ask.

Phin did not speak, only placing his hand on his chin and closing his eyes. His head drooped. Joe abruptly took out his cellphone and called 911.

"Someone's been shot," he told them after giving our location. "I'm- I'm not sure. He's not moving."

Adelita took Nellie away to another part of the store. I still sat in utter shock, holding my pounding head. After he had made the call, Joe got me some ice for my head.

The police and an ambulance were there maybe three minutes later. They took Karl and Phin away to the hospital immediately and the rest of us left not long after they did. While we were at the hospital, the police questioned those of us who were present in the store and the time of the

hold-up. I can't even remember half of what they asked us now. I was too worried about both Karl and Phin to pay attention to all the questions being thrown at me all at once.

The doctors wouldn't let me see Karl, as he was being operated on, but I was allowed to see Phin for a few minutes. He had been shot in the shoulder, but his health had stabilized, to my relief. He was unconscious throughout the duration I was with him, but it just made me happy that he was still alive. I was in his hospital room for about fifteen minutes after the bullet had been removed. I held his hand much of the time I was in there, caressing his long, slender fingers.

It was late when I got home. I remember that. It must have been about one in the morning. My parents had received word that something bad had happened. They said that they had heard about a shooting and I confirmed it. I told them about the attempted robbery and that Karl was in the hospital along with Phin. I knew that my best friend was in better condition than he had been earlier, but that was all that I knew at the time.

Then I got a call from Joe.

"Kailyn," he said. "The doctors just came out and they told me that . . . Karl just died."

I opened my eyes, and the brown coffin was there, my hand still resting upon its smooth surface. I shook my head and walked away, letting my hand run along its length until I let it fall over the edge and down to my side.

I stepped back towards the very edge of the canopy, letting others go up to the casket. Many of these people were Karl's relatives and they each took a rose from the top of the coffin. But Nellie and her mother did not go up with them to take any. I stood in line, letting other family members go first before myself. I picked up two white, delicate roses that sat upon the coffin.

Their aroma was sweet, pleasing to my sense of smell. If only I could have enjoyed the beauty and the scent on a better day. I went to the mother and her daughter and handed them each a flower and they thanked me through tears. I found a lump forming in my throat, so I simply nodded in reply and walked away.

I stood at the edge of the canopy again, looking out at the pouring rain. *How fitting*, I thought. I looked back to my parents, who were speaking to Karl's brother. Many tears were being shed back there and I did not wish to disturb their shared moment of sorrow.

I unfolded my blue umbrella and stepped into the pouring rain. I caught sight of Phineas, standing alone at the back of the canopy. Our eyes met for a moment and he joined me in the rain. As he did not have his own umbrella, he squeezed with me underneath mine. We walked together to his car, as he was my ride back home. Well, with his arm in a sling, I thought I was more his ride home than he was mine.

"What happened?" I said. "That night, I mean."

Phin did not answer me right away. He slightly grimaced and let out a deep sigh.

"You saw more than I did," I told him. "Everyone's been treating me differently and has apologized, but I know that there's something I'm missing. What do they know that I don't?"

He stuffed his right hand into his pocket and looked at the muddy grass we strode upon. His dark brown hair was dripping wet, as were his black tuxedo and the sling that held his left arm.

"The man that had you was the first one we got," he said. "I hit the side of his head with one of the short wooden beams by the front desk. I heard you fall when he did."

He paused, stopping beside me when we reached his Jeep.

“The other had pulled out his gun just before the power went out,” he continued. “He shot me once.” He gestured to his shoulder. “Adelita ducked behind my register with Nellie. Karl, Joe, and I fought him, but then we found that his gun was aimed at you.”

He stopped. He looked deeply into my eyes, pain surfacing there. I didn’t speak. I couldn’t.

“Karl jumped between you and the gun.”

I leaned up against his forest green Jeep, more tears filling in my eyes. He bit his lip and broke our gaze, looking at the ground for a few moments.

“If it weren’t for him,” he said finally, “I’m not sure as that you would be standing here with me now.”

I cried. I didn’t want to, not in front of him, but it all came pouring out and there was nothing I could do to stop it. A gust of wind came through and snatched my umbrella from my hands, but I was in too much pain to chase after it. Phin wrapped his good arm around me, holding my body against his.

“Why?” I blurted out.

“Kailyn,” he said softly, “he saved your life.”

I shook my head and buried my face into his good shoulder.

“It should have been me, not him,” I moaned.

“Don’t say that,” he told me, a mild tone of anger slipping into his voice. “Karl cared about you. We all do.” He paused. “I do.”

We stood there locked in that embrace and unable to part. The rain poured down upon us and we were dripping wet, but we didn’t care. We were there for each other. That’s all that mattered.