

First Place Short Stories

Real Justice

by Lori Hicks

I wake because I can't breathe. A hand covers my mouth, I can't speak. He pulls me from my bed, dragging my small body out the window with only my jammies covering my skin. He does it so easily. I yell for my cousin Matty, but she can't hear me. His hand tightly covers my mouth. I thrash my legs, hoping Matty will look. But no, it's as if I'm invisible. I make the motion and try to scream but nothing comes out. I swing my arms but he grips them tighter against his sweaty body. Matty is sleeping on the floor right next to my bed. Why isn't she waking up? Matty lies silent and undisturbed as this monster drags me out the window of my daddy's house. He turns and grabs my Buggsy as he closes the window behind us. Buggsy is my favorite stuffed animal. My mommy gave him to me. He hands me my best friend. It calms me for the moment as I pull it into my face, covering my eyes. He can't be all bad, I think. He sets me down on the ground and promises he won't hurt me because I'm a good little girl.

"Honey," he says, "I'm just going to take you to my house for some food, maybe a little TV."

Seems like a nice enough man. He looks funny. I've never seen him up close. He seems bigger than normal. His eyes are bulging, and his face is sweaty and red. His thin hair is very messed up, and there is lots of white spit in the corners of his mouth. Looks kinda like the time I put too much soap in the dishwasher, the suds kept seeping out the sides. For some reason he is pushing me on the back, forcing me to hurry across the dark street. Now I'm scared. I'm not wearing shoes, so I feel the cold scratchy pavement and the little rocks under my feet. The wet grass between my toes as we run across his front yard feels better on my bare feet. When we come up to his front door, I ask him, "Why are we eating so late? I'm so sleepy." I'm sure my eyes must show the signs.

"Your daddy told me you like chicken nuggets. I got them plus I have some ice cream too. Doesn't that sound yummy?" Staring at me, he rubs his belly.

Holding Buggsy up to my face, his squishy softness muffles my words, "I love 'em."

I have seen him across the street from my house. He has always been really nice. When I play in the yard, he always waves at me. He always offers me candy, too. I have seen him talk to my dad a few times. The only bad thing my dad ever said about him is that he sees him out at all hours of the night, working in the yard, working on the car, going through things in the garage. He always says how he keeps weird hours, you know, he says he keeps the lights on all night. I am kinda hungry. I do love chicken nuggets. So I guess it is ok to eat late.

"Come in here," he says, while opening the door to his house.

I do as he says, and then I stand there, waiting, as he latches his front door. I am now on the inside. My dad taught me good manners, always to behave with adults. But, this doesn't seem right. What should I do? I do as he says.

"You're a nice little girl," he says, rubbing my head, the way I sometimes do Sylvester, my cat.

"I like that you're not sassing me," he says, continuing to pet me. "I want you to go in there." He points to a dark room at the back of his house. "I'm gonna take you home, back to your house after we eat."

I walk down the long dark hall. I can see what looks like the glare from a TV. He is very close to me as we move toward the gray flickering light. I'm scared. It smells like stinky trash. I want to go home. I feel myself shaking.

"It's okay, baby, don't be scared." His voice is soft, but his touch is not.

He pushes me through the doorway. I'm too scared to run or scream. I can barely feel my legs. I do exactly what he tells me. I stand for a moment and look around the room, noticing a black sheet tacked up on the window, and the dirty floors that surround me.

"Where are we going to eat?" I don't see a table.

"Come and sit by me."

He walks around me and sits down. I look at him, at his big smile while he pats the spot on the bed next to him, insisting I sit. I walk over to where he is, and I do as he demands.

"Where are my nuggets?" I ask, clinging to Buggsy.

"Oh, let me get those for you. I'll be right back."

He stands up from the bed, he bends over and he gently kisses my forehead, the way my father sometimes does. Then he turns, walks over to the bedroom door and shuts it. Never leaving, he turns and faces me, walking back towards the bed. He begins to remove his pants.

"Lisa, Lisa, Lisa..."

This has been my awakening since I was eleven years old. I often wake up calling Lisa's name. My name is Madison, but Lisa called me Matty. I am the cousin who was sleeping on the floor next to the bed, the bed she was stolen from. I am the one who did not hear her screams. I am the one who was left to wonder why a twenty-eight-year-old man would want my sweet little ten-year-old cousin. That perverted pig is the scumbag I often see in my nightmares.

I was spending part of my school break with Lisa, just there on a mini vacation. That's when the predator took her while I slept right through it. After being out with friends, Uncle Joe returned home at around three a.m. He looked in on us, noticing Lisa was not in her bed and frantically startled me awake.

"Where is Lisa?" he screamed, pulling me up to his

startled face. I had a comfortable pallet bed, made out of blankets we had stacked on the floor beside her twin bed. Her bed was right under the window, the window with the torn curtain.

"I d-don't know wh-where she is. She was a-asleep right there." I looked around dazed and confused, still half-asleep. She was no longer in her bed. I will never forget the whole incident.

After Uncle Joe noticed the drape hanging down the wall, I saw his face glow red, eyes bulging out of his head as if that would help him see better. He began to run through the house, room to room, futilely yelling for Lisa. I had never seen him freak out like this. I had never seen anyone freak out like this.

He came running back into the room looking like a madman. "Where is her Buggsy?" he shouted, while tossing stuff around the room. Pulling the covers back on her bed, looking under everything as if she were hiding. "Where is she?" Then he ran outside and began screaming her name, "Lisa, Lisa, Lisa," at the top of his lungs, but no Lisa.

In the search for Lisa, I blindly followed him. I was in my pajamas, no shoes and no sense. I followed him into his hell. Watching as panic turned him into someone else. I just remember not being able to control my sobbing, my shaking, as I listened to the sounds of a wild animal rise out of my dad's brother. The tone of his voice, the shrill high pitch, the expression on his face, the sound of him calling Lisa's name is usually what now wakes me from my sleep. I wanted my own mom and dad. I needed my mom and dad. When I saw my uncle falling apart, I wanted my father to come to his rescue, but more, I wanted him to come to mine.

We were big girls, I was eleven and, as I said, Lisa ten. We were both already in bed when Uncle Joe left to meet his friends. No big deal. Or so we thought. That is until the media got hold of it. The coverage was torturous for my uncle. Not home when his daughter was snatched sounded awful by the time they were done with the story. Leaving two young girls alone with a predator living across the street was never a good idea. Who knew?

Since Aunt Nancy died of cancer, Lisa was everything in Uncle Joe's world. He continued calling for her as we wandered the neighborhood, up and down the street. People began pouring out of their homes. His panic got louder and louder each time he yelled her name. Realizing we had circled the area, returning to where we had started. He paused, falling to the ground on his knees, his head in his hands. He was lost. Lost in his own front yard.

I put my small hand on his shoulder and in the course of my sobs, I sputtered out. "Uncle Joe, should we call 911?" I remember he looked up at me from his crouched position. Both our eyes had tears in them. He grabbed me around the waist and gave me a big hug.

"Yes, Matty, we should call 911." Jumping into action, he swept me up and we flew through the air. We were in the house and on the phone in seconds. Suddenly, it was the eleven-year-old calling all the shots.

The police were everywhere in minutes. A missing child report brought people from all over. I never remember

seeing the sunrise before that morning. The police asked me tons of questions, to which I had no answers. I didn't have the answers then, and I don't have all the answers now. They went through every scrap of paper, tossed every toy, looked in every closet, every cupboard. They went through my clothes, my suitcase, my backpack. They climbed up into the attic, looked around outside, in the bushes, the shed, the garage. They dusted everywhere for fingerprints. I watched the man who brushed what looked like cocoa powder all over near the window, both inside and out. It was creepy. All the tiny prints of Lisa, probably me, and anyone else who had jumped on her bed, at times using the wall for balance. Fingerprints seemed to be everywhere near the bed and by the window. Some fingers appeared to drag across the wall while others lightly spotted the glass. It was the large thumbprint on the window that the police really seemed to pay the most attention. The officer even took my fingerprints, along with my uncle's.

They didn't seem to treat Uncle Joe with the same kindness they did me. His heart was being yanked out. The heart that the detectives now trampled and crushed as they questioned him. I could see the guilt strangle my uncle as he spoke. The sound of his madness changed his tone as he answered their questions. The officers acted as if somehow this was his fault. I can still hear them badgering him.

"Why did you go out in the middle of the night?"

"Where did you go when you left here?"

"Was Lisa with you?"

"Are you sure Lisa wasn't with you?"

"Why would you leave two young girls home alone?"

"Did you harm your daughter?"

They asked me a hundred times if Lisa left the house with her father, and I told them a hundred different times, she and I were in bed when Uncle Joe left the house. We were in our pajamas, she in the bed and I on the floor. We were talking about how much fun we'd had during that day. We were looking forward to tomorrow. As I answered their questions, I remembered my heart felt like it was throbbing in the back of my throat. My mouth got so dry talking to the detectives that I thought I would actually choke on my tongue. Air came out of my body, but it was extremely difficult to get the air to flow back in. At the same time I could feel a dripping sensation, like a sense everything good in me was slowly draining out. Never in my eleven years had I experienced anything so awful. I imagined this must be what it feels like right before you die. I just ached so badly for my cousin, I ached so badly watching my Uncle Joe, and I seriously ached for me.

He came the minute I called. My father immediately flew in to help find Lisa and to take me back home. He was there for Uncle Joe and me. But really, my dad was there to comfort his brother. So, I was still alone, even though my dad had come to the rescue. It turns out the pervert was a whisky drinking, crackhead, tweaker-type, that had a thing for little girls. The kidnapper lived across the street, in a small house with a detached garage where, according to my dad, he drank, drugged, organized his stolen things, and tore apart electronics, just for the sake of putting them back together again. None of the neighbors had a clue a

depraved individual lived on the same street with them. I remember talking with him, as a child. I can remember him talking with Lisa. He seemed to be kind enough. Two separate times Uncle Joe, in his fury and in his calm, went to the man's house while looking for Lisa. Now we know the sicko had her all along. Now I see that Dad's brother needed him more than his daughter did.

On the second day of Lisa's disappearance, everyone had been watching all the activity that had stirred around the house across the street. Police had big overhead lights surrounding the house the night before. It was obvious, even to me, something was just not right. I didn't even know what to think about what was happening, until I overheard all the conversations, all the different scenarios the others tossed around as if they were playing catch on a sunny afternoon:

"Why are they digging so many holes?"

"Maybe he cut her up and buried her in pieces."

"He could have hauled her out of here by now."

"Oh poor little Lisa."

"I am sure he molested her."

"He probably beat her."

"It's possible she's alive."

"Maybe he kept her hid somewhere."

"He's killed her."

"There is no doubt...she's dead."

I had to cover my ears...I couldn't take it anymore. Not another word. I couldn't get away from it. Most of what was being said was coming from the two men I loved most in the world. Now as we watched the house, the crowd gathered with a certain amount of intensity and commotion. We all watched the strange man's house, swarming as it was with men in blue, not realizing exactly what we were witnessing.

The cops never told my uncle what they thought, what they knew or what they found... if anything. They left him alone with his thoughts, which was worse. I think he just began putting it all together. As a kid, even I was starting to see the writing on the wall. We watched and waited for confirmation of our worst nightmare. My mind was now racing with all the possibilities. I stood with the others, leaning into my father, holding his big hand, wrapping his arm around me, hoping he would never let me go. We were told to stay behind the yellow crime scene tape, as we watched from across the street.

The tension among us rose when we saw more police cars arriving, closely followed by a white van. Soon after they pulled in across the street, my uncle saw them bring the man out of his house in handcuffs. It was at that moment he decided to leave his body...or not. I really don't think he knew what his self was doing. He took off running across the street. Out of control, he broke through the barricade and charged at the police car holding his neighbor. Still no sign of Lisa, he seemed sure this man had his little girl. He was desperately trying to get to him, kicking the car, banging the windows as the others fought to pull him back. With only his suspicions, compounded by the images in front of him, I think his mind must just have snapped.

The way his fists lashed out at the glass window,

I was sure it would explode any minute. I was afraid my uncle would be the next one going into the backseat of the police car. My dad ran to pull him off. Even as he was instructed to stop, he pushed through. He wanted to protect his brother, not only from himself, but to shield him from the swarming police officers. I am convinced Uncle Joe would have killed that wicked man had he been able to bust into the police car that day. While two men restrained my father, he begged his brother to hold it together, at the same time begging the police officers who now held Uncle Joe down, smashing his face into the ground.

"Please let him up...please let him go," he pleaded. They did, they released Uncle Joe and at the same time they released my dad.

He immediately went to his brother, grabbed him and held him tight, wrapping his arms around him, holding the two of them firmly together as they moved slowly through the crowd that had gathered. For some reason the wall of people did not open. My father continued to hold his brother close, pieces of grass and mud smashed underfoot. They stood in front of so many people. This was like the train wreck people could not look away from. Only this was no train wreck, this was the shattering of a man's life.

I watched from across the street as the whole thing happened so fast. All I could do was stand there, and cry my eyes out. So many cameras, so many people, so much pain. Suddenly I saw the two strongest people I knew fall to the ground in front of a wall of people and sob in each other's arms. I watched as the bad man was driven away from the property. My eyes followed the trunk of the car that carried him until it turned the corner and was out of my sight. I hoped forever. Still not knowing what he had done to Lisa, I just knew it was bad.

Just as my father was able to pick my uncle up off the ground, two men dressed in white cover-ups came out rolling a stretcher headed for the white van that was now backed up close to the monster's house. On the stretcher was a small black canvas bag. It became obvious what was in the carrier. The crowd of onlookers let out a gasp of horror. That was all it took for the pack of people to lose it. The cries were like a chorus, all different tones, different pitches and different octaves at different lengths. Everyone who tried so hard to find Lisa alive suddenly had the realization hit them. They looked so let down, so disgusted, so sickened. Then, worst of all, the thought hit them...there was a traitor among us. Someone who in the first twenty-four hours helped in the search now turned out to be the one who had hidden her all along.

Her tiny body was found in his backyard. It was in a freshly dug grave that revealed her naked raped remains stuffed in a bag with a stuffed bunny rabbit. The killer had her for two days. The autopsy showed no food in her stomach. Even after all I imagine she went through, I hate knowing she was probably hungry when she died. I remember standing back, kind of like an outer-body thing, you know, however outer-body an eleven year old can be. I stood and I listened as the reporters wanted to get the story, her story, our story, their story, how they saw it, what they went through, what we all went through. Some of them

added their take on Uncle Joe leaving us home alone that night. That didn't make him look so good. Even while they witnessed his greatest loss, his breakdown, and his remorse and guilt, it was as if they still wanted to see more suffering.

The news was getting out quick. Little Girl Found Dead. Even more media swarmed the site, their trucks, their vans, their cameras, their attitudes and their concern. Many of them had also helped in the search for Lisa, congratulating me for not being the one. Like that was some sort of victory or something. Like I was supposed to feel better because she was gone and I wasn't. Along with running news reports and encouraging people to help search, many members of the local media actually went door-to-door in the search for Lisa. They too were feeling the devastating loss by the outcome.

I sat and watched in amazement while the scene continued to unfold. One of the reporters was talking into a microphone, looking straight head, obviously dazed, doing a live story for the networks. I have never forgotten what he said to the cameras that day, and to anyone who was listening. In my mind, I have seen it a million times...or more.

"We must have the courage to face this horror if we are to make the world safer for our children. We need to find out what went wrong with this man. What made him prey on a helpless child who was sleeping? What can we do as citizens to guarantee our safety in the future from the drug addicts who are making America their victims? From these predators that are making children their victims. Today's throwaway children are tomorrow's runaways. Today's drug addicts can become tomorrow's killers. We need to grow up as a culture NOW. We no longer have time to wait. We need to mature as a civilization, and we need to face our responsibility to Each Other."

I will never forget his face, nor will I ever forget his words. At eleven years old, this one moment in time made me want to be a good person. I began to really wonder just how far away is heaven? Would I be able to make it there? I was sure my cousin did. I wanted to see her again some day, so I knew I'd have to be the best person I could be. I remember when the camera went off, seeing that man as he fell to his knees, then crumbled, melting into the ground. No cameras were rolling, no microphones as he cried uncontrollably into his hands while clutching his face.

My Uncle Joe ended up killing himself less than six months after Lisa died. That was the second saddest day of my life. This time I did not see my father cry. Over time, the hurt, the disgust, my pain, it all turned to anger. The more information I heard about the case, about the kidnapper, the killer, enraged me. It surprised me that my anger was not as much with the killer, as it was with the system that allowed him to walk free after being a perpetual offender. The system allowed him to live across the street from a little girl. Over time, my father openly shared his feelings about the kidnapping and everything else that happened to us that year. It didn't matter that I was only eleven going on twenty. He explained to me what a pervert was. My mom hated when he talked that way, but my dad and I shared an experience none of them ever did. He confides in me at

times, sharing his feelings...he needs to. I don't think even my mother knows how affected my father was.

I am thirty-five years old now. Most people refer to me as Judge Morgan. Though I have judged him over the years, I am not his judge. Today is the day the killer is finally being executed for what he did to Lisa. It has, however, been the past twenty-four years in prison as a child-raping murderer that has been his real punishment. His penalty of death offers him nothing more than an escape from real justice.



Lori Hicks

Lori Hicks is a freelance writer. She has written a collection of short stories, essays, and poetry. She recently completed her first novel and is now working on a screenplay. She is a member of the Scottsdale Society of Women Writers. A realtor by trade for the past 16 years, she has a sense of social responsibility and devotion to community that is expressed in her writing, undaunted by any subject. Lori was born in New Mexico but twenty-seven years ago moved to Phoenix, where she lives with her partner of twenty-five years.