

## The Reason Why

The child looked frightened. But any child might look frightened on that busy night in a crowded gas station convenience store. Carolyn Thomas imagined the child to be about eleven years of age. She couldn't guess the gender from the unisex jeans, blue jacket (perfect for the light chill of a southern Maryland spring), and black baseball cap the child was wearing. She wouldn't have taken much notice of the child if not for the eyes. Frightened brown eyes that seemed almost hollow against the child's honeyed skin tone. But then the child was among what must have seemed like giants—a large fellow near the sodas who smelled like cigarettes and perfume when Carolyn had passed him, two teenagers in thick heeled boots, one confident, the other not; a man in a grey, ill-fitted suit coming or going to work, impatient. He'd looked at his cell phone twice and softly swore at it. The five people who stood in line waiting to pay who she could only identify by the backs of their heads.

Then there was her. But she didn't think a petite black woman with short twists could be very frightening to anyone. Carolyn hadn't grown much since age twelve—to her horror—and at twenty-nine, still got carded when she went for drinks. It was a compliment at times but didn't help at work where few people took her seriously no matter how she modulated her voice. As an orthodontist, it took referrals to build her business since people, when seeing her, assumed she was a dental assistant or a new graduate. But she managed to put them at ease and her professionalism and skill in her chosen profession finally won her patients over.

It was from patients, both old and new, that she'd learned to sense fear. She'd known it growing up. She'd been a frightened child. Frightened of separation, crying every time she couldn't see one of her parents in view; of thunderstorms, burying under the blankets when the

thunder roared; of the Boogeyman under the bed; she had her parents use a flashlight to scare it away before they left the room. So perhaps it was just a nervous child she saw and nothing else.

Carolyn glanced at her date, Malcolm Verland, who stood in front of her in the long line after he'd pumped gas into his freshly vacuumed Lexus. He was another adult she hadn't included. To a child, Malcolm could appear to be a little scary—he was a black man of average height with dark, short cropped black hair. His silver rimmed glasses softened his angular features a little, but not much. He owned a portrait studio and liked to brag that he never forgot a face. He even mentioned that he could remember thirty names from the site for Missing and Exploited Children. She found that a rather grim, disturbing interest.

Carolyn sighed wondering why the line felt as if it were moving at a glacial pace. She wouldn't be waiting here if Malcolm hadn't decided to stop for gas on a busy interstate connector before heading to some new Thai restaurant he'd heard about. Why he'd insisted on stopping she couldn't really understand (if fuel had been so urgent couldn't he have gotten the gas before hand?), but she was sure this would be their final date anyway. She liked him well enough but after six months and several outings together there was no spark.

If he was interested in staying friends she'd consider it, but nothing more. They really had nothing in common. It had been more curiosity on her part. She assumed that was the reason why she kept saying yes to him whenever he asked her out. They worked in the same office complex. His studio was one level above her. He was very low key and laid back, she liked to plow ahead. On their first date they'd gone rock climbing, her suggestion not his, and somehow he'd ended up breaking his ankle.

She didn't think she'd see him socially again, giving him an awkward smile when she saw him riding the elevator using crutches four weeks after the incident. But after a couple of weeks,

and out of his cast, he'd called her again to see if he could see her, and she'd agreed, more out of pity this time. She had gotten him injured after all and said the second date would be on her. He didn't argue. They'd gone to her favorite seafood restaurant where he'd ended up with a rash because he was allergic to shellfish. He said he hadn't known, she wasn't sure she believed him.

The third and fourth dates hadn't been a disaster (thankfully) but not thrilling either. She didn't really know why she kept saying yes. The third date had been another pity yes. The fourth, probably boredom. A free meal with a nice guy was better than trying to find something to eat at home. But this would have to be the last. She didn't want to waste his time or hers.

Carolyn glanced at the child again. Something about the child's expression bothered her. It didn't just look frightened, but lost.