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DAVEY

John Gerstine

WHEN SAM DILLON came home from work, he wasn't too tired and dirty to kiss his wife. It was only a peck on the cheek.

"Where's David?" he asked, dropping heavily into an easy chair.

Nina ignored the question. "You're home early," she said.

"Yeah, business is dropping off. But the boss says it'll pick up soon." He opened a newspaper and spread it like a curtain in front of him.

"You didn't come straight home," Nina said.

The paper dropped quickly to Sam's lap. "How did you know?"

"I smelled it on your breath."

"Oh." The curtain went up again and Sam turned to the sports page.

"Been worrying about something?" Nina asked.

"Now what would I be worrying about," Sam parried.

"About David, maybe."

"The child oughtn't be out so late all alone," Sam said.

"What could I do? There's cooking, cleaning, washing to do. You can't keep a growing boy cooped up in a two-room apartment all day."

"Sure, you can't," Sam said. He was sorry he'd scolded. Nina was standing at the sink rinsing and wringing the dish cloth. His thoughts arched over ten years in their flight backward. He got up and kissed her on the back of the neck. "Some day we'll have our own home," he said. "It'll have a lawn and a basement and an attic, and a back yard for David to play in. And we'll have a car for a drive on Sundays, and maybe a maid to make things easy for you."

For a moment Nina's face lit up. Then just as suddenly it darkened, as if an awning had been released over it. "I don't mean to nag, Sam. Lord knows you're doing your best. But how're we going to get all that with you driving a truck?"

"We got some money saved, ain't we? It's only a little now. But some day I'll have my own business and I'll be able to buy and sell McGrath."

"No, Sam. I'm afraid it'll never be."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, resentfully.

"It's David," she said. "We've been kidding ourselves into believing he's like — well, like other children. But he's not. I spoke to his teacher today. They've tried special classes for him, but it's no use. We'll have to send him away — to a school where he'll be with kids of his own kind. And it'll take lots of money, Sam. More than every cent we have."

"That's not so!" Sam protested, clinging to his last brittle illusion. "Give the kid a chance. He's only eight, slow-getting started. He'll get there, all right."

"He's almost nine, Sam. Can't read a word, and can hardly speak so's a stranger would understand. Do you know what the other children call him —?"

"Stop it!" Sam cried. He sank into his chair and covered his

face with his hands. Sure, he knew what they called him. Crazy Davey. He'd heard them many times when they didn't know he was near. He'd seen them make the poor little fellow the butt of their jokes. He'd seen the child bewildered and unhappy, his numb brain unable to cope with the bright, agile minds of the other boys. He'd seen them hoot and laugh and tease until tears flushed the dirt from his son's cheeks. And he'd had all he could do to keep from crying himself as he took the boy home, all the time comforting him and telling him he was as good as the others.

Nina went over and ran her fingers through Sam's hair. "Don't take it so hard, Sam. It's not as though something just happened. It's been with us for years. Only —." Here Nina's voice broke. And Sam sensed he was wrong carrying on like this. But all he could get himself to say was, "Only what, Nina?"

She took comfort in the free flow of tears as she spoke. "—Only why did it have to happen to us?"

"It's not us I'm thinking about," Sam said in a tired, hopeless voice. "It's David. What'd he do to deserve being — the way he is? It makes you lose your faith in religion."

"Please, Sam, don't!" Nina begged. "Faith is almost all we got left. We need it now more than ever."

"Sure," Sam said, and there was a bitterness in his tone, the mingled bitterness of protest and of despair. "It'll do us good. But it won't help the kid any."

There was a familiar sound out in the hall. It was David coming up the stairs and then shuffling in his slow, plodding way toward the door. And he was crying. It was not unusual for him to be crying. For the other boys often teased and made sport of him in a manner which he understood. But this time his crying was of a different timbre. And Nina hurried to open the door for him.

David was big for his age and it looked odd for a boy of his size to be sobbing that way. His face was masked in dirt, except

the areas under his eyes where hot tears streamed in clean pink stripes until they dropped from the crests of his cheeks. His clothes were torn. And Sam didn't see how bare his back was until he got down on one knee and put his arm around the child and his shoulders became warm and soggy from the tears and his calloused hands felt the soft, naked flesh of the boy's back. And when he touched the tender spots, David screamed with pain.



He swung the boy around and stared. The welts were almost like furrows and some of them were already turning blue. It could have been done by a rope, or by a leather belt, or by anything, but not by hand. Sam was sure of that. "Who did it?" he said.

He didn't raise his voice when he spoke, but it was shaking. "Who did it?" he said again. And when his only answer was a vague look and some more crying, he gripped David's arms. He gripped them with steeled, powerful hands that had twisted ten-ton trailer loads around sharp, mountainous curves.

Nina was applying cold, damp cloths to David's back. But when she saw Sam, she cried, "Stop it, Sam! You're hurting him!"

Sam let go. And white marks on David's arms slowly filled up with pink again. "Tell me who did it," Sam shouted.

"Leave him alone," Nina cried. "Can't you see you're making him hysterical?"

Sam got up, put on his leather jacket, and zipped it up half-way.

"What're you going to do?" Nina asked. But Sam's only answer was to slam the door behind him.

Outside, he stood on the doorstep and looked up and down the street. It was getting dark. And the long row of apartment houses was taking on a oneness as though it was all the same, huge, four-story building. The street was deserted, save for a boy playing marbles by himself on the unpaved square under the only tree on the block.

Sam knew this boy and hated him. He hated him because he was a year younger than David, and had all the brightness of mind and the agility and co-ordination of body which his David had not.

"Peter, who beat up David?" Sam asked. His voice startled the youngster, who hadn't seen him coming.

Peter began picking up his marbles. "I don't know," he said. But Sam could see by the look on his face he was lying.

"You do know," Sam said. "It only happened a few minutes ago. And you were here. Who was it?"

"Look, I — I gotta go home," Peter faltered. "It's getting late for my supper."

But Sam grabbed his slender wrist and held it in a vise of muscle. "You won't go home until you tell me."

"It — it was a man," Peter said, fearfully, bravely trying to keep from crying.

Sam wasn't surprised. He'd figured it was. "Who? Which man? Where does he live?"

Peter hesitated. "Around the corner," he finally admitted.

"Show me," Sam said. He half dragged and half was led to the corner indicated. There he stopped to stare.

He'd stared many times at the neat row of houses on this block — the houses all different and individual, with spaces between them, and lawns and attics and two-car garages. To

turn that corner for Sam was to enter into another world, a world too beautiful to ever achieve, but a picture to be fondled and treasured and preserved. He lost himself for a few moments as he gazed with envy at the man, the only sign of life on the block, trimming his hedges with a huge pair of shears.

And then he remembered why he had come. The short contact with beauty only served to emphasize the pain and ugliness which had filtered into his life. And he thought of David — his little Davey — whose poor, helpless body had been whipped and torn, whose numb, foggy brain was even now sensing the pain, and wondering why. What beastly creature could have been cruel enough to —?

Could it have been this man in his shirt sleeves, smugly trimming the life and growth of his plants to suit his own precise, orderly existence?

Sam's grip on Peter's wrist had relaxed. But the boy was still there. "Is that the man?" Sam asked, half hoping in his pyramiding anger that it was so.

Peter looked from Sam to the man with the shears, back to Sam again. There was the tight mask of fear glued to the boy's face. He put the back of his hand to his wide-open mouth and bit his knuckles. And then he turned and fled.

Sam didn't run after him. He had read the expression on Peter's face. That was the man, all right. But he wasn't sure. If he could only be sure!

He went home, his mind in a whirl of increasing fury. David's anguished weeping had subsided into a quiet sniffing. And Nina was trying to soothe him, gently rubbing his temple as she held his head to her breast, and whispering words of comfort to make him forget.

"Come with me, Davey," Sam said. "I want you to show me."

"Don't!" Nina cried. But it was too late. Sam already had the boy's hand and was leading him down the stairs.

They headed straight for the corner, Sam with strong, pur-

poseful strides, and David in his clumsy, plodding way dragging along behind him. The man was still at work on the hedge.

"Is that the man?" Sam asked. David looked up adoringly at his father, who had always been kind and protected him, and he kissed his hand. Sam wiped the wetness on the leather of his jacket and repeated: "Is that the man who beat you?"

David looked to where Sam was pointing. A look of terror crept over his features but was soon replaced by the confident knowledge of Sam's strong presence. He spoke in his laborious, barely intelligible manner that only his parents could comprehend. "He — he the man!"

The man looked up as he saw Sam heading his way, the boy close behind. There was a patronizing smile on his face as he saw David, which infuriated Sam even further. But the smile vanished when he saw Sam's expression, and he even backed up a step.

"What did you do to this boy?" Sam demanded.

"Now, take it easy, old man. He was spreading filth on my walk, and I merely —."

Sam waited no longer. The shears went up in a feeble defense. But Sam smashed his powerful fist past them into the fellow's mouth. The man staggered backward, trying to keep from falling. But Sam's fist shot out again with even greater force, and down he went. Sam grabbed his shirt and tie in one fierce grip and raised him up. The shirt gave way, but the tie held. And Sam pounded again and again at the defenseless face, all the time muttering, "And that's for Davey . . . and that . . . and that." He lost himself in the fierce joy of revenge, until fatigue rather than remorse caused him to let go. And the man's body dropped limply to the ground.

Sam gazed, fascinated, at the flow of crimson from the man's mouth, along the side of his chin, and onto the ground where it was sucked in by the soft, brown earth. He stared at the still,

prostrate form at his feet. There was no sign of life. And fear crept in where triumph had been but a moment before.

"Come on, Davey," he whispered. "Let's get out of here."

He hurried to the corner, all the time looking behind to make sure he hadn't been seen. There was only a scrap of grey daylight holding out against the comfortable darkness of evening. And he felt safe enough to slow down to a walk as he turned into his home street.

He could see young Peter, further up the street, standing on his tenement stoop. He was playing with a small rope, his hand going up and down, trying to effect a circular motion with both ends at the same time.

David saw him, too, and stopped. He refused to go on. Sam had never seen such fright on his son's face. "What's the matter, Davey Boy?"

"I — I afraid," David stammered.

"Afraid of what?" Sam said. "Your daddy's with you. He'll take care of you."

David pointed to Peter. "He — he the one who hit me."

Peter beheld them now for the first time. And when he saw who they were, he dropped the rope, ran through the doorway, up the inner steps, and disappeared into the throat of the house.