

Not a Busy City

Sergeant O'Rourke left John Chi lane late that evening. The smell of hot noodles and soy sauce laden rice surrounded and engulfed his body like a raging fire in the dry season. It was a long trip home to the higher land in the north of town where his bungalow sat like a bright star on a cloudless night. Amy would soon be expecting him as they were preparing for an evening at The Sun.

"Hello, Father," Amy said with an unusual enthusiasm.

"Are you ready yet?" O'Rourke replied coldly without eye contact.

The icy crystals in O'Rourke melted as he looked up to greet Amy. She was standing at her dresser, her hair falling beautifully around her neck and hugging her shoulders in just the right places. She wore a long dress enhanced with a hem of lacework and a full petticoat underneath. Pastel blue gloves fitted her long lady-like fingers perfectly and her hat held a small bunch of tiny blue flowers tied together by a matching blue lace ribbon. Sergeant O'Rourke could only think of how much he wished Amy's mother was alive to see her.

"You look good", Sergeant O'Rourke managed to get out without choking on the lump in his throat caused by his astonishment.

Amy, surprised by this unusual comment, couldn't hold her excitement and anticipation.

"Father, Jim wants to take me out to the pictures!"

O'Rourke quickly recovered from his state of awe. His mind started racing, faster than ever. Backwards. That one word triggered a tawdry load of emotions. All that he could think of was her mother. She was crossing a busy road to say hello to her friend standing outside the picture theatre. O'Rourke knew he never should have let her go but there was no stopping her when she was wound up in enthusiasm. Her mother was as persistent as Amy; she knew to never argue but, like Amy, never gave in. O'Rourke finally agreed and to this day held himself responsible for her death. If he had of been stronger and tougher she would be standing beside him to admire her beautiful daughter. O'Rourke was just too lenient and gullible back then; he never should have given in to his wife's pleas to go. From the day of her tragic accident O'Rourke changed as he was convinced that his weakness caused her depressing and devastating death. He would never forgive himself if that happened to Amy.

"No," he said without hesitation.

Amy's face fell as fast as a weighted pearl diver.

"But why Father?"

Amy knew she mustn't question him, but her yearning was a persistent fly after the meat safe.

"Father why? Why?" she pressed on.

"Stop Amy!" O'Rourke exclaimed. "You don't know nothing 'bout that night. Too young you were. Now listen, you are not goin' off with that boy. Hear me? Not now or ever. He'll get you killed..."

O'Rourke's tough exterior suddenly melted away. He knew deep inside that Jim was probably a fine lad but he was haunted by his wife's tragedy.

Amy, hesitant to say anything for the fear of a hard clip over the ear, finally spoke.

“Father, Jim is sensible. This is not a busy city; there aren’t any busses. I’m going to be okay. I promise.” O’Rourke once again fell silent, pondering Amy’s reassurance.

“Amy I can’t let anything happen to you. You are all I have and your mother would want you safe. This time I’m takin’ you over to the theatre. No arguments.”

“Father that was you and mum not me and Jim!” Amy rebuked.

His face lit up with anger and dissatisfaction. O’Rourke was heating up like a boiler and was ready to explode. He was furious with her persistence.

“Don’t argue with me Amy, I said no! No! Hear me?” O’Rourke yelled. “Don’t speak to me like that miss!” His eyes were wide with fury and a giant heavy-handed hand, destined for her petite little face was the last thing Amy saw before she shut her eyes in fear and horror.

Millie’s bark was the next this she heard and she opened her eyes to see her father spin around to the noise. He turned back to watch his daughter’s once beautiful smiling face turn upside down and a small tear trickle down her face.

“Okay father,” Amy said with a hint of a disappointed attitude.

His face was a carved stone, cold as the night. Amy felt every emotion and thought that he felt. Amy looked deep into his eyes and realised his pain. To her father’s disbelief she knew exactly the cause.

“Father, I know what you are thinking. It’s not your fault.”

O’Rourke’s eyes developed a layer of watery glass as she began to speak.

“You cannot blame yourself. You couldn’t help what happened. She just...”

Amy looked into her father’s brown eyes, and beyond the surface found a stroke of caring and kindness. She had no option but to agree.

“Okay Father, thank you.” Amy said with a tone of dissatisfaction.

“Now we’d better get something out for dinner...”

Amy knew her father’s dismissal was intentional. He never lingered on sad memories for the fear of exposing himself.

“Must be a policeman side to him,” Amy thought to herself.

Sergeant O’Rourke put the lantern in her room out and walked over to the meat safe to set free the earthy aroma, drawing all nearby flies to feast. He removed a piece, covered it and proceeded to search the pantry with a trail of flies in hot pursuit. He retrieved a packet of arrowroot biscuits as Amy came over.

“Okay, you ready?”

The small nod from Amy triggered O’Rourke’s movement towards the door. They walked in silence outside; O’Rourke trying not to think about his late wife and Amy contemplating her father’s personality. They farewelled their binghi and gave him a tip on the way, an act Amy recognised as one to cover and remove the focus of his sadness. He snatched up his pipe along the way; it was brown and smelling of burnt leaves. She knew the warm side that he was mostly scared to expose for fear that it would cause tragedy. Everyone else only saw the hard ice barrier he hid behind.

When they reached the edge of the dusty, dreary dirt road and were perpendicular to the makeshift street, O'Rourke grabbed Amy's tiny hand. He held it tighter than ever before as they crossed in the dusk light of the evening to the pictures. The stadium was framed in sawn timber and covered on the exterior with timber board. The roof was mostly made from shingled tiles but had been replaced with rickety timber boards only just nailed in place.

They both stood in appreciation and marvellous awe until O'Rourke suddenly and abruptly yelled, "Amy get off the road!"