

THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD (NEVER KISSED A GIRL)

BY

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*Author's Note*

This story is based on the song 'Thirty-Eight Years Old, Never Kissed a Girl' by The Tragically Hip, a band from Kingston, Ontario. According to the band, this is a fictional tale. I couldn't resist telling the full story, at least the full story as I imagined it.

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Punching metal parts for a living wasn't much of a career, but it paid the bills. Pop got me a job down at the fabricating plant four years before, right out of high school. It took me six months to get my union card, so I did a lot of shit jobs the first few months, cleaning the grindings out of the presses, oiling the rollers, sweeping out the bathrooms. Stuff like that. But a card was everything in this town back then. Sure, you could work the ferries and the tourist shops in the summers, but that barely covered beer, let alone food. The Thousand Islands may be for lovers, but then again, they're just passing through. Kingston was a rough town. It had been for a long time, as long as I can remember, at least.

Operating the presses wasn't as bad as cleaning them. You set the steel, backed away and hit a button. Thirty thousand pounds of hydraulic force pressed the sheet into twenty or thirty of whatever it was you were jigging, and then slid back up the rail. Old Harry Wright used to call it the tightest pussy he'd ever seen. We were always careful around it. I don't know of anyone who ever got caught in it, though we were always hearing about accidents down at the Westeel plant in Hamilton. That was a much bigger operation. Just as noisy, but a higher throughput, and shit happened a lot faster there.

Most of the white collar folks in the town got paid on Thursdays. We got paid on Fridays. Safer that way. Last thing you wanted in a metal shop was a drunk or hung-over bastard falling asleep at one of the machines, and getting himself hurt, or worse, hurting someone else. Falcon Steel kept fifteen guys busy ten hours a day, five days a week, and kept another four or five hopping all night long on maintenance and cleaning jobs. We worked seven to five, with fifteen minute breaks at 9:45 and 2:00, and lunch from 11:30 to 12:30. Most guys kept

pretty tight with that schedule, we were paid by the certified piece, and it usually took more than two or three guys to finish a piece, so a slacker wasn't tolerated. Not usually, but there was always one. Jimmy Tolliver was the one at Falcon in '73. His father was good friends with McGlaughlin, the foreman, and had somehow weaseled his way onto the floor full time, without a card.

Jimmy was a pain in the ass. He was twenty-one, three years younger than me, and skinny as a rail, with a yap that never shut up, even when the machines were running, and everybody had their earplugs in. Pop used to wonder how come Jimmy never lost his voice. The boy could talk. Worse, he didn't know nothing about nothing, and butted into conversations he shouldn't have. That Friday was one of those days.

"Hey, Donnie, you going down to Chappie's tonight?" Davey asked. We were sitting in the lunch room at the plant, sipping on our fourth cup of coffee for the day, and pulling on some greasy Player's cigarettes Davey had bought from the vending machine on the morning break.

"Naw, man. I got something to do tomorrow. Gotta be up early." I said. Davey and I had hung out since before I started at the plant, even though he was two years older than me. Except for Jimmy, we were the youngest carded workers at Falcon.

"Not even for a couple of brews?"

"Naw. Not tonight."

"You sure, Donnie? Becky might be there." Davey teased.

"Becky's always there." Becky Petersen and I had been flirting for two years, but nothing had ever come of it. She was always seeing someone when I was available, and I was

always seeing someone when she was available. We'd get drunk together once or twice a year, and try to get something going, but it never worked out.

"What's up tomorrow?"

"Going to see Mike. It's his birthday."

"Oh." For Davey, that was enough to know. He would change the subject without me even asking. Jimmy, of course, was another story. He had been sitting just a little way down the table a second before, but purposefully slid towards us as he heard a topic that interested him.

"How's Mikey doing?" he asked casually.

"Fine." I took a deep pull from my smoke, and tried to get Davey to say something quick to stop Jimmy from talking, but Davey had also been taking a pull, and needed a second to get enough breath to speak.

"How long's it been? Sixteen... seventeen years?"

"Eighteen. Just over eighteen." *God had it been that long?*

"Long time to be locked up."

"Go away, Jimmy." Davey ordered. It was loud enough that guys farther down the table heard it. It wasn't the first time that day somebody had said it, but the tone meant everything. Everyone knew what that tone meant. Everyone, but Jimmy. Davey had one of the quickest fuses I have ever seen, and there were certain things you just never asked about. And Davey had been looking for a reason to pound on Jimmy for months now.

"Aww, come on, Davey. I'm just concerned, that's all." If he had been sincere, and then walked away, everything would have been all right. But he smiled that little piss-ant smile of

his. Bad timing. Davey didn't even get up. He just lifted his elbow off the table and swung it fast and hard, right into Jimmy's teeth. Jimmy's head snapped back, and he flipped backwards off the bench, cracking his noggin on the cigarette covered cement floor. The lunch room quieted so quickly, we all heard the second bounce of his head. Davey didn't wait for Jimmy to recover. He flicked his cigarette onto Jimmy's chest, and rose slowly from the table, massaging the tip of his elbow. The room watched to see if Jimmy would counter attack, but he just curled up into the fetal position and protected his bloody face with his arms. Davey walked slowly away. Every man in the room knew that sooner or later Jimmy was going to get it, and it wasn't surprising that Davey had done it to him. Just the same, as Davey and I left the room and headed back to the machines, we were sure we heard a little applause mixed in with the laughter.

But as we started pressing and shaping the steel, all I could think about was Mike. Eighteen years. I'd been alive for twenty four years. And for eighteen of those years, my brother had been in prison. I saw him as often as I could, maybe once or twice a month, though Mom and Pop seemed to go every weekend. He was, after all, still in the same city, up the road a bit from Falcon at Millhaven Maximum Security. Every once in a while, I'd be working on a job, and see the work chit, and find out it was something for the prison. I don't think I ever will come to terms with that. I was helping to build the prison for my brother. And I knew full well, that if I had been the older brother back then, that I would have done the same damn thing.

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It was May 1955. I was six then. Mike was twenty. A big spread in ages these days, but not back then, especially with four brothers and sisters in between. I was the youngest in the Mallory clan. Tony was nine, Brenda eleven, Ricky fourteen, and Cathy seventeen. Pretty well spread out, but we were still pretty tight. Mike was out of school, working road construction.

Flagging, most of the time, and spreading tar the rest. He had been too young to fight in Korea, and housing was short now that most of the boys were back, so he was still living at home. He had his own room, which was about as cool as could be, even though it was just the old porch Pop boarded up for him. We packed the walls full of straw and newspaper to keep it warm in the winter, and opened it up in the summer to let the breeze blow through. I remember sitting out in the big maple tree as the sun went down at night, watching the glow of a cigarette move slowly behind the screen. Mike would lay there for hours after work, sometimes reading, sometimes just lying there, and puffing smoke rings around the mosquitoes. He was just cool.

I shared a room with Tony and Ricky. Cathy and Brenda had one too, and, of course, so did my mom, Anne, and Dad, Lester. Whenever we had company, I'd sleep with my parents and Tony and Ricky would sleep in the living room, which was fine with them, because they could stay up until the adults went to bed, then turn on the radio real low and listen for the stations out of Toronto and Buffalo. Reception was better at night. Sometimes we could get New York.

Mike drove an old beater Ford truck, and was always tinkering with it. Not to soup it up or anything, just to keep it running. We were always short on cash for one reason or another, so Mike had to make do with what he could for spare parts. Sometimes he and I would take trips down to the junkyard on the weekend and I'd help him scrounge the parts he needed. He says he brought me because I had small hands and could get stuff he couldn't, but I like to think it was because he liked having me around. Tony and Ricky were always picking on me, and Mikey was my bodyguard. He'd carry me around on his shoulders when we went downtown, even if there were girls around, especially if there were girls around. Mike was a looker, tanned from the time on the road crew, and pretty strong. He didn't need my help in picking up the chicks, he

said, but I didn't hurt, as long as I kept my mouth shut when he was working on one. I learned a lot sitting on those shoulders.

Not that Mike was a playboy, far from it actually. He was one of those nice, quiet guys. The kind the girls could bring home to papa and papa would love. But girls, they're kinda funny at that age, even back then. Mike wasn't dangerous enough for them, and for all his talking to them, I know for a fact that he'd never gone farther than second base. Mom and Dad were pretty strict about that kind of thing, and Mike was just too damn responsible to get a girl pregnant. Dad would've skinned him alive.

When I really think about it, I knew Mike better than anyone else in the house. Tony and Ricky only paid attention to me when they were beating me up, and Brenda was mommy's little helper. Cathy was always kind of distant, and drove my parents crazy. She was rebellious enough for all of us, and there were plenty of heated debates between her and my folks. It became this nightly ritual, and always during dinner. We were all required to be home for dinner, and for as long as I can remember, it was at six o'clock sharp. And every night, she'd be five minutes late. I have a feeling that sometimes she waited outside until she was sure she was late, just to press Dad's buttons. I never had the nerve to press those buttons. Dad was a scary man when mad. Trust me, I got into enough trouble unintentionally that I didn't need to test him intentionally. He had a voice like a double-barreled shotgun, and a hand like a two by four. I got some pretty good paddling when I was young, like the time I got caught throwing stones at the side of the house. My butt ached for hours and my pride for days.

But the summer of '55 changed us all a lot, and it all started the May 24 weekend - Victoria Day weekend to you non-Canadians. It was the biggest party of the year and the first long weekend of the summer. Most of the kids headed down to Picton to the beaches for a

blowout party. Those who hung around were either too young, or had to work. Or were grounded. Cathy was grounded that weekend. She'd missed her curfew the weekend before, and Dad was determined to not let that happen again. Mike was working overtime on the widening of Highway 15, and getting double time for holiday pay. The rest of us were a wee bit young to be out partying. So we had a fairly quiet Saturday at home. The weather was finally warming up after a particularly brutal winter and wet spring. I spent most of the day helping my dad pull weeds out in the community garden. Tony and Ricky were playing soccer down at the Legion Hall, and Brenda and Mom were doing a little shopping for fabric for some summer clothes. Brenda was pretty good with the push-pedal Singer, and Mom had a knack for designing clothes that didn't always look like they were home made. We preferred to think of them as custom tailored. Of course, with three older brothers, I got a lot of custom tailored hand me downs.

I saw Cathy, but I don't think she ever saw me. Dad was turning the compost pile in the corner of the community garden with Charlie Rogers. I was on my knees between the new rows of peas, pulling the weeds that had sprung up since we planted a few weeks before. Cathy came out the back door of the house, and looked towards the garden. When she was sure dad wasn't watching, she walked quickly down the split between our house and neighbor's. A few seconds later, I heard an engine, loud and powerful, from around the corner. I knew it was Johnny McAllister's Ford, Cathy's current beau. Johnny had a '46 Ford Pickup that he liked to soup up. It had a pretty cool looking paint job and a blower on the engine that hummed like a jet engine. Mike said that if Johnny ever stepped on the gas real hard with that thing, the torque would tear the block from the engine mounts. I was always waiting for that to happen. Johnny's family had a little more money than most people in town, and every cent Johnny had went into that truck. Dad never heard the engine, or if he did, he never thought much of it. I said nothing. I had

learned a long time before that being a tattler wasn't good for anyone, especially me. Not with three older brothers.

That was about two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Mike came home around 4:30, looking every part the road crew he was. He had tar splatters on his boots and his overalls. His hands and face were black from the dust and grime. But he smiled like only a man who had put in a hard day and was glad to be home, could smile. And he was in a good mood. His crew boss had told him that by the end of the summer he would probably be driving one of the trucks instead of flagging or slagging tar. Not only was driving an easier job, it was also better pay. His tan would suffer a bit, he said, but he'd cope.

It was dinner time when Cathy's absence was first noticed. Like I said, Cathy was always late for dinner, even if she was in her room. I remember Dad's face. It wasn't anger he showed, or frustration, more disappointment than anything. He sent me to find her, and it took me only a minute to prove that in fact she wasn't in the house, which I already knew, but I wasn't about to let on that I already knew that. I was six, but I wasn't stupid.

We said grace, and listened as Tony and Ricky described their soccer games, like they were both stars. Mike listened attentively, and gave some pointers. He had been a good player back in high school. Tony was a good listener, but Ricky had too big of an ego, and kept butting in with his stories. I watched Dad's eyes as we ate. He kept looking up at the clock on the wall. 6:15 passed by, and 6:30 was coming quick. Mom and Brenda were clearing off the table, and us men were pushing our chairs in when I heard the screen door open.

"Where the hell have you been?" Dad's fuse was lit.

“Out.” Cathy said simply. She had a look of defiance on her face. No apology, no excuse. If someone had dropped a pin, you could’ve heard it for miles.

“Come on boys.” Mike recognized the signs and gave my head a little tug towards the door. Ricky and Tony followed. We knew better than to be in the same room when those two squared off. We crowded out onto the front porch. Mike lit up a smoke, and we all sat down, me on the floor. We were all silent. We were out of harms reach now, but we weren’t about to miss the entertainment. It was morbid, and we all had a little grin on our face. The only light in the room was Mike’s cigarette. The porch faced east and the sun was setting, so we all hid in the shadows and waited for the next words.

“You had your mother and I worried.” Dad was a little calmer.

“You shouldn’t be.” All she had to do was apologize and it wouldn’t have been so bad. But Cathy was a free spirit. She practically spat out her words.

“Damn it, girl. Don’t you take that tone with me.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“You’re seventeen years old. You can’t take care of spit.” Dad’s language rarely crossed into the vulgar range when Mom was around. But the point was understood, by everyone but Cathy.

“That’s right, I’m seventeen. You married mom when she was only eighteen.” Cathy had a point. It wasn’t something that was normally brought up, but even I had done the math, with a little help from Brenda, a few months before.

“Seventeen is not eighteen, young lady. When you are eighteen, you can go and make your own stupid decisions. But as long as you are living under my roof, you will abide by the

rules I set.” I’m sure every parent has said that line at least once in his or her life. It’s an old standard. And every kid has a reply for it. Cathy’s wasn’t that original.

“I can’t wait. Three months and I’m outta here. And you won’t be able to stop me.” No matter how many nights these arguments occurred, I was still amazed that Cathy had the balls to talk to Pop that way. I’m still amazed that Pop took it. If any of us boys had talked like that, even Mike, there’d be a swift backhand coming real quick. But with Cathy it was different. It was as if Pop knew that she was different and that kind of tactic wouldn’t fly with her. There was a line with her that even he couldn’t cross.

“Where ya gonna go? You gonna shack up with that no good punk McAllister? You think I don’t know about him? Them McAllisters are all the same. You stay away from them, girl. They’re no good.”

“Johnny treats me right. He shows me respect, which is a hell of a lot better than what I get around here.” Even though I wasn’t in the room, I knew that the sudden silence indicated a glaring match between Pop and Cathy. It was Mom who always stepped in at this point.

“Cathy, go to your room.” It was said quietly, somberly. We listened as Cathy shuffled to her room and slammed the door. There was quiet in the kitchen. Those of us on the porch looked at each other and knew it was over for now. Mike took a long drag on his cigarette and finished it off, stubbing it out in a half full ashtray, and blowing a stream of smoke out the screen.

We sat and talked quietly about our days until Mom came to get me to give me my bath, then tucked me into bed around 9:00. She didn’t say much that night, just tucked me in and gave me a kiss on the forehead. I didn’t see Pop that night, but I could hear him in the kitchen,

fiddling with the radio, trying to pick up a new radio station we had heard about from friends. As usual, it took me a while to get to sleep. I'm pretty sure I was the only one who heard the window open, but I didn't get up. I knew who it was, and I knew what was happening. But I still knew better than to tattle.

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