With The Eyes of a Child

by

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The field was warm, with only an occasional breeze to cool me as I worked the garden. The area was almost silent in the late afternoon sun, with the calls of a few birds and the swoosh of the wind turbine blades my only company as I tended the rows of freshly planted vegetables. The late spring rains had finally stopped long enough to begin planting and I was anxious to get the crop in as soon as I could.

I heard the front screen door slam loudly and looked up from my hoeing, glad for the distraction but mildly annoyed at the reason.

"Papa! Papa!" Jennie shouted as she ran toward me, her small legs pumping as fast as they could. "N'other T'namie!"

I leaned on the hoe, wiped the sweat off my brow and patiently waited for her to reach me.

Poor Jennie, I thought, raised in a world of almost daily catastrophes and not understanding any of them.

"Is it going to get us?" she pleaded as she stopped in front of me, eyes filled with concern and fear, and anxiety filling her small, frail body.

I knelt down on one knee, bringing my face to her level, and smiling gently.

“Where did you hear about the tsunami?”

“On the TV, Papa. D'ey said it was coming fast. Is it gonna get us?”

"No, darling. It won't get us. Don't you remember? We're too far from the sea."

She looked a bit relieved, but there was still a trace of fear on her face.

"Did they say where it would hit?"

She thought for a moment before replying.

"S'eattle, I think," she said slowly.

"Do you remember your geography?" I asked, hoping to to reassure he further.

"Uh huh."

"Do you remember what North America looks like?"

She nodded her head quickly.

"Do you remember where we live in North America?"

Another positive nod.

"Do you remember where the Pacific Ocean is?"

"Way on the left," she said eagerly.

"Way, way far from us," I said calmly. "Too far for any tsunami to reach us."

Her face brightened considerably and she turned and ran back to the house, disappearing as quickly as she'd appeared. I stood there, watching the closed door for long moments, saddened by the world my five year old was growing up in. She was seeing and hearing things she couldn't comprehend, and, too many times, it frightened her more than I could bear. Yet, I tried my best to protect her as well as I could, thankful for the safe environment our village offered.

Not for the first time, I looked at the rusting combine and the collapsed silo, and toward the solar panels that gave us the electricity which allowed us communication to the outside world, wishing we still had the technology that made life easy. But that world was long gone; gone with the collapse of civilization so many years ago.

I returned to my hoeing, happy for the mindlessness of the chore.

A short while later, I heard the soft rustle of a woman's long skirt approaching, and turned. It was Mabel, my housekeeper.

"Is she napping now?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "and I'm sorry she came out to bother you. She was gone before I had a chance to stop her."

"Don't worry about it. I was glad for the interruption, and I'm glad she still needs me for some things."

Mabel blushed slightly. Jennie had taken an immediate liking to her when she had first come over after Susan had died, and it was heartening to see them get along so well together. Jennie needed a woman in her life and it was easy to see that Mabel was enjoying her relationship with Jennie.

"When will you be finished here?" she asked softly. "I have your dinner planned and need to know when to get it started."

"There's no need for that," I said softly. "I can handle it."

"You work hard all day, Aron. You deserve a break and it's no trouble for me."

I smiled back. I knew already I'd lost the argument and the thought of having dinner all ready for Jennie and myself was appealing.

"Okay, but you know you really don't have to do it."

"I know," she said, "and really, it's no trouble. So when will you be done?"

I looked out over the soon-to-be rows of vegetables, estimating what I needed to get done today and what I would like to get done today.

"I'll be in in two hours."

"Dinner will be ready," she said as she turned and slowly walked down the row I had just hoed.

I watched her depart, once again noting her tall, slim figure, and her dark brown hair, and immediately cursed myself for the unbidden feelings that arose in me. Susan had only died six months ago. It was much too soon for those feelings, and I felt ashamed. And it didn't help that, even with my thick head, I could see that she wanted me, even though she'd done nothing blatant to suggest it.

I returned to the hoeing with a new vigor, hoping the extra effort would kill the shameful feelings, at least for now.

* * *

The bright orange rays of the setting sun filled the kitchen as Jennie and I finished eating. The quiet relaxation of the moment was broken by the sound of a

horse-drawn carriage approaching. Our farm was a couple of hours from the village and it was very unusual for unexpected visitors to come at this time of day, so, when Jennie jumped down from her chair and started for the door, I called for her to stop.

"Please put the dishes in the sink, and wait in here," I said as I made my way to the front porch.

"Evening Jarrod," I said to the driver as he brought the team to a halt. "Rather late for you to be out, isn't it?"

"Something's come up we need to talk about," he replied, getting down from the wagon and coming up on the porch, face tense.

I motioned for him to sit on one of the porch chairs and I joined him.

"Go on, " I said.

"Do you remember the newscasts, about two weeks ago, about the serial killer who seemed to be heading north from Richmond?"

"Vaguely," I said. "I try not to listen to the news these days."

"We have him. The Nelson boys caught him after he attacked their Pa."

I immediately sat up, fearful of what he might say next.

"How is John?"

"He's in bad shape. The Doc doesn't think he'll make it."

I leaned back into the chair.

"We have him tied up at the Nelson farm right now, with guards, so he won't escape."

I knew what he was going to say next, but I remained silent, hoping against hope that I was wrong.

"Aron, Michael's called for an Elders Council tomorrow morning. We have to decide what to do with him."

I let out a long sigh. This was a situation I'd long thought about when we had formed our community twenty years ago, when everyone was left to fend for themselves. We hadn't come up with a satisfactory solution then and had put in on the back burner, and eventually forgot about it. Now it was back with a vengeance.

* * *

The meeting hall, which doubled as our theatre, was packed. Despite it being

planting season, it seemed like everyone in the community was present. Even the Richard's family was here, which surprised me. They were over five hours away by wagon, which meant they'd started out before dawn.

Micheal surveyed the room from the Council table, looking to see if there were any last minute stragglers. He motioned to the Council members that it was time to begin. After the room quieted, he addressed the Council.

"I called this meeting because we need to decide what to do with Jim Nelson's killer. For those of you who haven't heard, Jim died last night of the injuries suffered from the attack. We have the killer tied up at the Nelson farm, but we can't keep him there indefinitely."

"Michael," I said, "do we know for sure this man is the killer?"

"Jim's wife and sons all said the man smashed in their front door and threatened them with a gun. When Jim tried to object, the man shot him and that's when the sons tackled him. When I arrived later, I could see the broken door and the splattered blood. There's no question about who the killer is."

I nodded slowly. At least this part was clear cut.

"String 'm up!" came a shout from the crowd. It was immediately echoed by similar calls. Michael raise his hand to quiet the room.

"That is one of the options," Michael replied, "but not the only one. We need to examine all the options and decide which one the whole community can live with."

"What about the Principle that we hurt no one?" asked another voice.

"That definitely has to be considered," said Michael, "along with all the implications it evokes.

"As I see it, we have four options. The first, as already mentioned, is to kill the killer. The second, is to ship him back to Richmond and let them deal with him. The third is to keep him confined here; to basically lock him up for the rest of his life. And the fourth is to keep him secured here but put him to work. In other words, make him a slave."

I sat silently, waiting for any comment from the floor or the other Council members.

"We can't keep him here," Jarrod said at last. "We have no place to lock him up, and we can't spare the manpower. I suggest we ship him to Richmond."

Murmurs of agreement ran through the crowd.

"How would you suggest we do that?" asked Michael. "It's a two week journey to

Richmond by wagon. How can we be sure we can keep him confined during the trip, and who would do it? It's planting season and no one wants to be away for that long. If he got loose, I'm sure he'd kill whoever was taking him there, and then come back for the rest of us."

Loud discussions broke out in the crowd and Michael shouted for quiet. After the crowd calmed, Peter, our newest Council member, spoke.

"Michael, it seems to me the arguments you put forward for not shipping him off are equally applicable to keeping him here, in whatever form. Am I correct in that assessment?"

"I believe you are Peter, but that doesn't rule out those options."

More murmurs from the crowd.

Michael scanned the Council table, pausing at each member to see if they had any comment. He lingered longer on me than the rest, almost challenging me to say something, but I remained quiet. Finally, he addressed the crowd.

"This is something we are not going to resolve today. I suggest you all go home and think about it. We'll meet again in two days and make our decision then."

* * *

The sun was long set, and I sat, relaxed, with a drink, resting in the warm glow of the fireplace and flickering lamps. Outside, a mild breeze rustled the newly formed leaves, and the occasional hoot of a owl could be heard.

Mabel sat beside me, her high-back easy-chair angled slightly to mine but still facing the fireplace. Her drink sat on the table that was between us as she quietly watched me.

"I'm glad you could stay," I said.

"I gather you did this a lot with Susan," replied Mabel.

Yes, I thought. This was something Susan and I did a lot. She had a way of helping me clarify my thoughts when situations seemed to overwhelm me.

"When we founded the village, just after the crash, we thought there would be a lot more violence than there was. We knew, even then, we didn't have the resources to keep anyone locked up for any length of time, nor did we want that. The founding principles of honesty, respecting each other, and acknowledging that we are always responsible for our own actions let us work, if not in harmony, at least peacefully with each other. But we knew we couldn't impose those principles on others who were just passing through. We knew there would be others who might try to force things from us, but we'd agreed that, if that happened, we would return an equal

force as long as no one was seriously hurt.

"Fortunately, we rarely had to resort to that and, even when we did, it was not nearly as severe as we'd feared. Certainly nothing like this, and no one ever died."

Mabel leaned forward, toward me and I caught a whiff of her perfume, tempting my thoughts elsewhere.

"This was the one thing," I continued, "we never came to an agreement on. We discussed it for months and finally gave up, hoping someone would come up with a solution we hadn't thought of.

"But that never happened. We just forgot about it, and now it's back."

I slumped in my chair and took another drink. Mabel edged forward a bit more.

"So this is the first time someone has killed in the village?"

"Yes," I sighed, meeting her eyes directly, "and we need to resolve it ourselves. We have no where else to turn to."

"I gather there's only two options left. Letting him go or killing him?"

"Really, there is only the last one. He's already said he'd come for any of us who opposed him."

"And you don't feel that killing him is right."

"I don't like the prospect of killing anyone, but I can't see any other way. I guess what I'm asking for is what I can do to live with myself if we do kill him."

"I see."

"And there's another aspect to consider. We don't want to devolve back to the society that used to be. We have a chance to develop something better and I don't want us to slip back."

"What do the other council members think about this?"

"They're pretty much in agreement on that."

Mabel sat back in her chair, slowly took a sip of her drink, and remained quiet for a few moments.

"So tell me, Aron. What is your problem here? You seem to have made up your mind, even if you don't like the choice. I don't believe you wouldn't be able to live with killing the man. Or is it that this forces you to do something against your Founding Principles, and that is what you can't live with?"

I thought for a moment before replying.

“That is part of it,” I said slowly, “but I worry that if we make this concession now, more and more concessions will come up in the future and we'll drift so far away from the Principles that it will be as if they never existed.

“And. And I don't know how I can explain this all to Jennie.”

Mabel chuckled and leaned forward again, moving to the edge of her seat.

“Don't sell your daughter short,” she said. “Jennie is a lot more perceptive and intelligent than you realize. You probably didn't notice us, but we were at the council meeting.”

“Why did you take her there?” I interjected, and leaned forward. “That was no place for a child.”

I could see that she was taken aback by my outburst, but I remained unapologetic.

“I'm sorry, Aron, but she was curious about why you had to go to town and, once we got there, she wanted to see where all the people were going. And she wasn't the only child there.

“Aron, you can't protect her from everything.”

I suddenly felt small, and slid back into my chair.

“How did she take it?”

“She asked a lot of questions after the meeting, and a lot of them showed the kind of wisdom you may be seeking.

“Perhaps you should talk with her in the morning.”

The revelation surprised me, as did Mabel's suggestion. I wanted to protect Jennie, not drag her deep into an adult's world before her time, and yet I sensed that it was already too late; that, as Mabel implied, she was already there.

Mabel had been right about one thing though. The dilemma I faced was of my own choosing, and maybe Jennie could, in her childish innocence, help me out of it.

* * *

I had long thought that, for any complicated issue, if you could discuss it with a five year old and have them understand it, you truly understood the issue and could clearly convey it's importance. My talk with Jennie the next morning brought

home just how true that thought could be.

After breakfast, we sat on the swing chair on the front porch while I told her about Mr. Nelson's murder, and what that meant to the village, and the man who murdered him. I also told her about the problem I had with all the possible solutions of what to do with the murderer. There were many times I struggled to convey my thoughts into terms my daughter could understand, but after an hour, she seemed to have grasped everything.

“What do you think and what would you do?” I asked her.

She was quiet for along time and I could see she was thinking hard on what I had asked.

“What would you do, Papa,” she finally said, “if Billy's dog bit me?”

I was caught off guard by the question.

“I don't understand. Why are you asking that?”

“It's important.”

“I guess I'd talk to Billy' father about him better controlling the dog and, if he couldn't, about putting the dog down.”

“Just like the sick cow we had last year?”

“Yes, like the sick cow.”

“Well,” she continued slowly, “I think the man who hurt Mr. Nelson, I think he's very sick and you should do that to him too.”

I should have been aghast that something like that was coming from my daughter's mouth, but Mabel's warning from last night had me prepared for anything. Still, I needed to know why she had said it.

“Jennie, you do understand that it would mean us doing to the man what he had done to Mr. Nelson.”

“Uh huh.”

“Don't you think that breaks our code of respecting people?”

“Uh uh.”

“I don't understand.”

“It's easy, Papa. He's sick and can't help himself. He'll keep hurt'n people, and we

can't fix that. It wouldn't be nice to keep him locked up. It's like Billy's dog. If it won't respect us, we have to get rid of it. We can't let it get sicker 'nd hurt more people."

I saw then that, in the eyes of my daughter, all she saw was kindness in an action I was struggling to accept. She wanted to help the man not be sick and believed that killing him was the only way. I knew now that Mabel was wrong. Jennie still lived in a child's world.

We had the general meeting the next morning, and buried him that afternoon.