

# *The Heart Child*

Word Count: 2008

Reader, you hold in your hands a love story, but not a happy one. It begins in the year 1945, with a young woman searching for Sanctuary. She never found it. She was pregnant, and soon after arriving at the small town of Seven Oaks, gave birth to a baby girl. She loved her, from the very moment she saw her, or perhaps even before, when mother and daughter lived and breathed as one. She named her baby Leila.

Let us skip a few years, to 1948, when the baby girl was three, and it was Mama, Teddy, and Leila. Although from Mama's perspective, there was only Mama and Leila. There had been a Papa once, but Mama never mentioned him, and Leila had never known him.

Leila was two when she first met Teddy. He came to her through an open window in her nursery, much like how Peter had first met Wendy. It was night time, and he had sat on the window sill watching the rise and fall of the covers as they waltzed in time to her breathing. Although no introductions were exchanged, and Leila stayed sleeping, in her dreams where they both share, on an island of their own making, they danced together as only children can.

They met every night, though it is more accurate to say that he never really left. He had been waiting there from the beginning.

Teddy can be summed up in the essence of one word. He is loyal. The kind of loyalty that comes from knowing what can truly make another person happy. Because this is all anyone really wants: to be happy. You see, Reader, from the moment Teddy was born, his world was Leila.

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Leila and Mama lived at 149 Erb Street West, in a little brown house. Ms. Caraway was a single mother, and she and her daughter were often the topics of discussion for their neighbours. Mama had simply come to town one day. Nobody knew who her family was and who she was friends with.

It is detrimental that a little about Mama is understood. Their neighbours' gossip stemmed from a certain fear. The Caraways were different, if only because Mama was a woman who had not lived her whole life in Seven Oaks, a place where status is equivalent to how long a person has remained unchanged. Perhaps their behaviour is justified, because this was a form of protection.

Ms. Caraway often brought her daughter to town meetings. It was a Monday. Mama and Leila had just stepped inside meeting room three. The mayor, a bearded man in his 40's, stood behind a podium, looking very much like a doll. The men and women of the town in attendance were so alike they could have been family. They did not pay Mama any heed, but Mama was a sharp woman. She knew that this step was crucial.

"Please, Sarah, will you set up the refreshments outside?" the Mayor asked.

"Of course, Mayor," Mama never failed to reply. This was a job someone else should have done, but Mama went about her task like it was a privilege. Leila sat on the floor in a corner of the hall outside meeting room three, watching as Mama glided around, magicking stacks of glassware and assorted baked goods out of nowhere, and elegantly setting them out on the buffet table. It seemed to her wrong that Mama was out here, while everyone was inside.

"Why do they make Mama set up table, Teddy?" Leila asked. "Mama told me town meetings were for discussing if parks should be built and where to build them."

Teddy's next words were careful. "Leila, your Mother is fighting a battle." Leila frowned.

"But Mama's just putting the food out," she said. Teddy mused.

"It isn't a battle you fight with fists, Leila. Your mother's battle is with the town's misconceptions." There was a pause, and then finally, "Leila, these people don't know who your Papa is, and because they don't know, they think that your mother gave birth before she

married him. Do you understand so far?" Leila pondered for a moment before nodding slowly.

"I think so," she said. Everything was a sort of battle.

"In this town, for a woman to have a child before she marries is a sort of taboo," Teddy continued.

"I don't understand," Leila said.

Teddy watched Mama set some buttered scones on a delicate rose print plate. The rose print tea set was one of the trivialities the mayor had purchased expressly to impress the young mother. "I wonder," he said, quietly.

"I don't understand," she repeated.

"I'll tell you when you're older, Leila," he said.

When Leila was old enough, Mama took her to Seven Oaks Elementary School. Lee Marcel noticed Mama the first day Leila walked in dragging Mama behind her. The Caraways fascinated him. He couldn't understand why his mother always talked *about* the Caraways, never *to* them. Why she would snap at him if she caught him watching Ms. Caraway at church, like he had done something much worse than stare.

Lee thought that Ms. Caraway was beautiful. And this was one reason why his mother disliked the Caraways; because Ms. Caraway's beauty came from class. It was in her intelligence and something inherent.

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Lee couldn't help thinking about Leila, and the decided dismissal of her by their classmates. It was something he couldn't put his finger on. It was because these children had never known something other than their reality. They have never known another town or another existence. How can they know to compare? All they know is what has always been.

Lee was a boy who was very conscious of behaviour. His parents had taught him that one had to always act with good manners. They said that a person's manners reflect their upbringing and gave a person class. He wondered about the idea of class.

Lee was, regardless, what one would call a respectful boy. He listened more than he spoke, even though in the end he did not always agree. It is important to mention here that although Lee might not always agree, he never voiced his disagreements. The truth is, that was all they wanted, anyway: someone to listen; the motions of appearing.

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"Hello," he had said that day.

"What do you want?" she had asked. Lee was surprised, for he had not expected to hear irritation from Leila's tone. In fact, he had thought she would have appreciated his act of pity. He had still sat down on the grass next to her, undefeated. The truth was, for a long time, he had made up conversations with her in his mind, generated responses. But when he had finally exchanged words with her, it was not about Elizabeth the Second, or the war in some place called Korea. Instead, it was about how he and his family had gone to the park last Sunday, all six of them and a big yellow lab. It was perhaps fate that this was what he began with, because she listened.

Teddy looked on, as Leila watched, more than listened, to Lee. He stood in a remote, shadowy corner. A look of loss crossed his face. "The beginning of the end," he whispered.

"I'm glad you found a friend, Leila," he had said afterward. He had smiled then. In the empty spot that should have held his heart, he knew he should be happy for her. But when he had looked at his fingers, they glossed over, becoming just slightly transparent, shimmering. Like butterflies, like something insubstantial. Somewhere, a clock was ticking, an hourglass rotated, and the sands of time began to fall.

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“You know that Caraway girl’s mom?” Jimmy asked Lee. They were in the classroom now, his voice hushed. “You know what my dad said?” Jimmy’s eyes were wide with a secret. “He said she’s a whore,” he whispered, not really knowing what it meant, knowing just enough that he should not be repeating it.

It was the way he said “that Caraway girl,” more so than “whore” that had finally done it. Someone had pulled the trigger.

Lee gripped the edges of his chair. “Don’t say that,” he said softly. He couldn’t look at Jimmy. There was something dark that weighed at his heart. For a while, they just sat there silently, neither boy moving. Finally the silence was broken by Jimmy’s challenge. He had lost face.

“What are you saying, man? Are you in love with that whore?” he bluffed, like that was explanation enough.

Lee finally turned to look at the other boy. There was a look of instability in him. He searched Jimmy’s eyes, for something he knew not the name of, and he never found it. Maybe it had never been there. Lee stood abruptly, his chair falling over in the process, interrupting the class. He stepped backward awkwardly, away from the other boy. What he had not found had stunned him beyond anything else he had ever felt. He had realized in that moment how different, yet at the same time how similar, how human, they were. We want to think that our thoughts have beauty, have some form of nobility. We want to think that humanity stands for justice. But how do we define justice?

“Lee Marcel!” the teacher yelled. “Sit back down immediately!”

At the inkling of unfolding drama, all eyes in the classroom turned to look at Lee.

“I won’t.” Lee said. Ms. Woods was taken aback by this determination. Lee had never been a trouble student. The classroom was mute. No one knew how to react.

Leila watched Lee from her seat. Teddy stood beside Leila in a shimmer, like glass. His hands sought hers out, and he held them tightly, but Leila didn't notice. She hardly noticed him anymore.

“Who are you people?” Lee suddenly asked. “I don't know you!”

“Stop this nonsense immediately and sit back down!” Ms. Woods repeated. Lee didn't hear. He was gripped by a deep fear that he was the same as Jimmy, the same as everyone in this town; a fear that man wasn't really man. He swirled in a circle, searching the eyes of his classmates. What makes him who he is?

“Lee!” Ms. Woods commanded, one last time. Finally he looked at Jimmy, who he had only a moment ago hated. He did not any more, no more than a man can truly hate a dog. “What makes me different from you?” he asked. Jimmy never answered this question, and in the years to come he never had an answer.

It was at that moment that Lee realised that he had failed something he never knew he had started. Something had been lost in the journey between his thoughts and theirs. All he wanted was some beauty in the world. Anything would have been fine. He looked at Leila. She, too, never said a word. He had done something unspeakable. He had been ungrateful. He had dared to think that what they had was not the best.

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Lee never left Seven Oaks. He is what the children call “Chug” and the adults call “Drunkard.” They said his mind was scattered.

Leila had gone to a university out of state. She became a famous politician, and although she never returned to Seven Oaks, they heard about her all the time. And they told their friends, “I went to school with that girl.”

On nights when the sky is calm, and even those who have long since grown up are able to find the way, a boy waits for a girl. Reader, perhaps I have been hasty in saying that

this is not a happy story. I do not understand happiness any more than I understand love. It is  
with this thought that I leave you, for we've reached

The End.