

Time To Go

Mina tried to come awake but couldn't. She coughed hard, but her mind still swam in a confusion of sounds. She heard her dad's voice, sounding insistent like it was time to go to school or to be somewhere, but louder than usual and more urgent. She came awake when she was thrown through the window of her bedroom and landed on the porch roof in the snow, shards of glass embedding themselves in her arms and legs. She couldn't stop herself from sliding down the steep roof in the snow and dropping off the edge to the ground below as smoke billowed out of the windows. She heard her father yelling for her mother and then everything was drowned in sirens and flashing lights and more confusion.

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Almost a year later Mina (she pronounced it MY-na) walked along Genesee St. in the bright sunshine of an October afternoon on her way back from school. A crisp rustling sound moved ahead of her as a breeze blew red and yellow leaves across the front yards and down the sidewalks of the homes she passed. She walked by pretty and inviting houses that looked to have fresh coats of paint and neatly trimmed shrubs. There were nice cars in the driveways. The lawns were a special shade of green this time of year when the sky shone down so blue and clear.

Sometimes she would see pretty and frilly curtains in an upstairs bedroom window that might mean a girl her age lived there, a girl who went up to bed at night after watching Desi and Lucy, first kissing her mother and father goodnight and giving her dog one last pat on the head. Her heart would ache with loneliness for the rest of the walk back. She crossed Hampden Place, a side street from which the greasy smells of Jean's Beans and Fish Fry would come wafting down on Fridays. She loved that smell. It reminded her of Friday night take-out with her family.

Mina stifled a shiver and shrugged herself deeper into her sweater, holding it tightly closed at the neck. She thought of crossing the street to be in the sun, but if caught she would be spoken to for not following the exactly prescribed route back from school. The days were getting colder, but the coats hadn't been given out yet to those who were without them. She didn't like this route because it passed the theater where her mother had taken her to see movies all the time. Well, maybe twice, but these were now remembered as very special times. She came to King Cole Ice Cream and remembered her father bringing the family for cones one hot and humid night last summer after a picnic in Frankfort Gorge. This was before her world was destroyed by the fire.

Mina neared the Uptown Liquor Store with a mixture of pleasure and dread. In the window she knew she would see a small cardboard sign on which a couple smiled out at her, holding drinks and each other's hand. They looked very much like her parents. Each day since she had noticed it, Mina would stop for a while and stare at the cardboard display. But she knew a child could stand looking into a liquor store window for only so long before someone came out to speak to her or called the orphanage to report her.

This day, when she approached the store's window, the sign was gone. She entered the store and asked the clerk if the picture-sign of the couple holding hands was to be thrown out. "It's gone," he said, "probably somewhere in the cans out back."

Mina ran around to the back of the building and looked through trash cans and old cardboard boxes. She found the sign and sat for a while staring at the couple that looked so like her parents. The printed cardboard was about one by two feet and thin enough to fit under her sweater, up under her chin. One end of the sign showed below the bottom of her sweater, but she would somehow hold her books very low to cover it up. She hurried toward the orphanage holding the sign against her beating chest. She would somehow sneak it into the building and up to the dormitory she shared with nine other girls and quickly hide it in her half of the dresser. She would conceal it at the bottom of a drawer under her socks and underwear and denims and play blouses, hide it from anyone who might tell on her. Then when the aloneness pressed in on her she could spread the clothes apart and look down at the couple holding each other's hand as they smiled up at her. The memory of her mother and father was so much more vivid with the sign. Mina would feel them with her.

She resolved that if her secret were ever discovered, she would figure some way to keep the picture at any cost. If necessary, she would steal out of the building in the middle of the night and take it with her. She would never give it up. Her mother and father hadn't given her up.

When Mina returned from the refectory after supper that evening, Sister Cliodhna (klee-UN-a) was standing at the dresser in the dormitory. The nun looked first at the girl and then into the opened drawer. Then she closed the drawer and took Mina by the hand to a room next door with a few upholstered chairs that was sometimes used by the visiting social worker.

"Mina, honey," said Sister, "your mom and dad are never coming back. They're up in heaven with your little sister."

"I know," said Mina, as she looked over the nun's shoulder.

"Look at me, honey. We don't allow pictures of the family ... even pretend pictures ... because you have to start a new life."

"I know," said Mina, as she continued to look over the nun's shoulder.



Sister Cliodhna continued to look at the girl and didn't know what more she could say or do. She wasn't convinced herself regarding the policy, whether it was right or wrong, helpful or harmful. But she knew that for Mina it was time to move on.

"I'm going to let you keep the picture for a few days," said the nun, "if you promise me to keep it a secret from *everyone*." Mina agreed. "And you must promise that you'll think about what I said and make sure the picture is gone from here before Saturday." Mina shook her head.

The fall weather had begun in earnest as Mina sat in her classes on Friday morning. She was glad that last night the hats and coats had been handed out to those in need. The wind whipped the rain around outside and splashed it against the 4th grade classroom windows and the overhead lights were turned on against the gloom outside. She had had to bend the sign in two to fit it into the plastic book bag she carried on rainy days. The pretend picture couldn't go back to the orphanage

and Mina did not yet have a plan for what to do with it. She would not throw it out.

The rain let up during the afternoon and when school was out Mina headed back to the children's home. She followed the prescribed route, but not precisely. When she came to the liquor store, Mina walked down the alley to the back and looked around for a place to hide the sign. Finally she settled on what seemed like a dry area underneath the small loading dock, up under a heavy timber. There she left the pretend picture of her mom and dad so she could gaze at it whenever she came from school.

Over the next few weeks she stopped every day. The spot under the dock was not as dry as she had hoped and the sign deteriorated more and more. The couple holding hands were now barely recognizable after being outside in the alley for so long. Eventually, Mina arrived one day after a windy rain storm and the poster was gone. She looked frantically around the back alley to see where it might have landed.

After a while, she gave up the search and sat down on the dock as the season's first snow began to lightly fall. The smell of fried fish and french fries came to her from up the street at Jean's Beans. She felt truly alone in the world. It was hard to let go of her life with mom and dad. She felt it was right to try to hang on. But she couldn't.

Maybe the loss of the sign was for the best, she thought. The couple weren't her real parents. Sister Cliodhna told her yesterday there was an older couple interested in having Mina come to live with them. Maybe she would have an upstairs bedroom with frilly curtains on the window.

Maybe the people would be as nice as mom and dad. Maybe, but she really didn't think so. She knew that it could never be so. She looked around the alley as the snow continued to fall. She knew it was time to go.

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