

Lea Park Chapter 5

Sitting slumped forward on his bed, Grandpa pulled at the far corners of his memory.

'Well, I knew someone who lived there,' he began, 'Harriet, or Hattie or something. She was a friend of mine.'

Stephen's grandfather had been brought up in the same neighborhood, in a large house almost on the site of where the apartment now stood. His own father had made some clever investments and the family had not been short of money, so it seemed unusual that the old man would have had a friend who was homeless. Nevertheless Stephen imagined a tale of teenage romance emerging from the old man's memory, or from his imagination, or probably from a cocktail of both.

'Yes, Hattie or Katty or Kathy we called her. Colored girl she was. Beautiful.' He looked down and seemed to be wringing his hands, in prayer or in sadness.

This surprised Stephen. They were a close family - they had to be - but he had not heard his Grandpa talk this way before. He had never heard anyone in his family talk directly about African-American people like that. He knew his Grandpa was out of date with his language, but he let it go.

'Always had this red ribbon in her hair. Saw her almost every day on my way to school. She'd sit on the stoop of the shelter and we'd chat awhile.'

He lifted his head up and Stephen saw the deep veins straining against his grandfather's weak translucent skin. He shut his eyes and took a shallow breath through his nose.

'She smelled good.' He emphasized the word *good* and took a deeper breath this time, as if seeking out her scent from all those years ago.

Stephen had never heard this story before, despite all the hours sitting around talking that they did at the kitchen table. He pressed for more detail.

'So you had a homeless friend? Who lived right there in the shelter? When was that?' Stephen tried to seem supportive as this long-forgotten story emerged from the old man's mind.

It was probably long enough ago for that sort of thing to be frowned upon. Stephen remembered some of his US history classes which had covered the topic of segregation in the South, and Grandpa's generation would have been right in the middle of all that. He looked across at the old man.

'Oh I don't know son. It was a long time ago. We had a friendship, see.' Grandpa gazed a little into the middle distance. *'She wasn't exactly homeless. It wasn't for the homeless in those days. More for troubled youth. Colored kids. Some called it the asylum, but it wasn't bad. We never got no trouble from it or nothing.'*

'Black children, Grandpa,' Stephen corrected him. The old man ignored him.

'But they bullied her. She used to tell me these stories. She had such a beautiful sadness. They chased her. Said she was a witch.'

Before Stephen could register his reaction, Grandpa reached up to the bookshelf above his bed.

'Have I shown you this before, boy?' As he had not shared the books with Stephen before, Stephen was going to pretend this was all new. As it was, he pulled down the psychology book which Stephen had only glanced at given the complicated-looking title. Grandpa sat on the edge of his bed holding the book with a degree of reverence. He opened the text and pulled out a fraying piece of yellowing paper. He held it out gently to Stephen.

'Take care of this, son.' It seemed to Stephen that this was something important. He carefully unfolded the newspaper cutting he had just been handed. It was from the *Texas Sentinel*. Not a paper Stephen had ever seen or heard of. He searched out the date before reading the headline. 17th August 1936. Over sixty years ago.

The feature was an article on the disappearance of a young girl called Katherine 'Kathy' Jefferson. There was a grainy picture - a close-up image of a young black girl sitting on the stoop in front of the shelter, which was unmistakably the same building as the one that had just been gutted by the fire. Stephen's mind agreed with his Grandpa's - even from the picture he thought she was beautiful. She had the looks of a nice person. Stephen read the short article.

The girl was twelve years old when she had disappeared. The article reported witnesses from the shelter as having seen her running towards the forest. *'I saw her that day. She just kept right on runnin,'* reported one eye-witness, while another interviewee questioned her thinking. *'She wasn't right in the head. Dressin' like a man an'all. And just runnin' off barefoot like that.'*

'Did they ever find her? What was wrong with her?' asked Stephen. His mind suddenly squirmed with a mass of contradicting questions, and the sweatiness of his palms suggested an unseen link between what he had seen that evening and what he was now reading.

'There was nothin' wrong with her!' Stephen's grandfather made to get up off the bed in frustration, but instead sank back down onto the mattress, his head in his hands. *'Nothin' wrong at all. They chased her out, she was last seen running towards the lake. Didn't even have no shoes on. She couldn't swim. They just gave up on her. They let her go. Let her disappear. The police came down on the morning it was reported. Looked out over the water. And left before lunch. That was it. Black girl, no close relatives. That was my friend. She had no family. Apart from her twin sister. For all I know, she's still out there.'*

'C'mon Grandpa, you're scaring me now. I saw someone.'

'Sorry son. Let's not be stupid here. You saw some low-life in the ruins. Kathy was never found. I often looked around those woods to see where she might have gone. There were a few little ponds. But I never found her.' Stephen thought he was actually going to see his Grandpa cry. Instead he took the paper from Stephen and folded it carefully back into the book. Stephen resolved to take another read of it when he next could.

He patted the old man's knee affectionately and headed back out to the kitchen.