

The Dime

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The Dime

Anna danced down the dirt road, enjoying the warmth of spring for a brief moment. The threadbare dress felt as coarse as sandpaper on her skin. Her family was poor, dirt poor even for prosperous 1920's. Scratching out a living in southern Pennsylvania, she was the one of nine children, the eldest of the five girls.

She was born without her middle fingers on both hands. No one knew why, whether it was due to heredity or some outside environmental factors. From the knuckle on up, the finger never developed. Her 'difference' made her an outcast as a child, the one who took the blame for everything. Everyone that knew called her 'the cripple'.

The holes in her shoes were a testament to her family's poverty, but Anna knew no better. School had left out late and she had stayed behind to help the teacher clean up. Her brothers and sisters were already home doing chores.

Walking into the door to the kitchen, she saw her father sitting on a chair facing the doorway. A gruff, angry man, Anna feared him, but more so feared his drinking. The look in his eyes was one of disgust and anger. Several of her brothers and sisters stood around him. They took one look at her and began to scatter. The whip lay on the table. A fear gripped her heart. What had she done? Was she that late?

Her father was already drunk, she could tell it in the way his eyes were red rimmed. His overalls were filthy from work in the fields.

"You stole, Anna," he slurred out.

"I didn't!" she cried out, the fear causing her voice to crack.

"A dime's missing!"

“I didn’t take it!”

She knew exactly what money he was talking about. Her father, not trusting banks, kept his liquor money in a cigar box under his bed. He spent most of their family’s funds on liquor to keep from feeling the pain of failure.

“I counted twice.” He stood up, reaching for the whip. It was four feet long, made of leather. Her father used it as punishment for the children and his wife. Anna had felt its sting before and the tears already began to form.

“But I didn’t,” she sobbed. “I didn’t!” And she hadn’t. She knew of the cigar box, knew that it contained money, but no amount of candy or sweets would tempt her into taking from it. Her father would find out. And this would be the result.

“Don’t lie to me!” he roared at her, causing her to cower. The whip curled out, slithering like a snake. Anna sobbed again and began to back away towards the door. “Goddamn cripple! I’ll teach you to lie!” He shoved the chair out of the way, sending it scattering across the floor. There was punishment coming. She knew that if he reached her, she’d be whipped.

Anna fled.

She spun on her heel, desperate to escape the coming fury. Her hand slipped on the doorknob and her father was upon her. He grabbed her wrist, throwing her across the kitchen. Crying out, she landed in a heap by the stove, scrabbling into the corner and curling up into a little ball in expectation of the coming lashes. Tears streamed out from her eyes even before the blows hit.

The crack of the whip was followed by a sharp and agonizing pain. Misery coursed through her and she screamed: “I didn’t take it, Papa! I swear I didn’t take it!”

His response was to continue to flail away at her, striking her repeatedly on her exposed back. Each strike burned and caused her to jerk as if she was a marionette. The material of her dress tore on her back, the hardened leather cutting through it like paper. Six, ten, fifteen...

Anna covered her face with her arms, protecting it as the lashes rained down. Nothing she said would placate him now. In everyone’s eyes, she was a cripple, a defective. Different from her other – better – siblings. Her face was wet and her breath slipped out between strikes. Eighteen, twenty, twenty-four...

The whip went mercifully silent.

“What are you doing?” the voice was plaintive, questioning. Hesitant. Mother.

Finally, mother would put a stop to this! Mother would save her...

Her mother stood hallway, looking across the kitchen at where her father stood over Anna. A somber individual, her mother was a solid woman, but reticent. Submissive and pragmatic. But she had stopped the whipping. That was all that mattered.

The hot burning on her back rose to greater intensity. Anna cried completely and fully, both in pain and joy that the whipping had ceased.

“I’m teaching this lying cripple not to steal!”

Her mother never entered the kitchen, preferring to stare at Anna from the hallway. Then through tear streaked eyes, Anna watched with disbelief as her mother looked away and left the room. Despair and grief and betrayal crashed down upon Anna. Then there was the crack of the whip and the pain was renewed.

As the blows fell, it reinforced upon her that she was nothing but a cripple, a liar and a thief. Nothing but what they made her out to be. She hadn’t stolen the dime. She was innocent, but this was her punishment to endure.

On and on, the blows rained down. She lost count after thirty and wavered between consciousness and unconsciousness. Then suddenly, it was over. Her father tossed the whip onto the table, and stormed out of the house, slamming the kitchen door behind him.

Anna couldn’t move. Her back was on fire, and her dress lay like rags upon her. The cloth stuck to her like a wet rag and she realized that blood was running down her back and arms.

She lay there for a long time, long after dinner came and went, her siblings ignoring her prone and weeping form, stepping over her to reach the sink with their dishes. The sun went down and darkness filled the home.

“I didn’t take it,” she feverishly whispered to the darkness. “I didn’t take it.”