Stephen King - Popsy

by Stephen King

Sheridan was cruising slowly down the long blank length of the shopping mall when he saw the little kid push out through the main doors under the lighted sign which read COUSINTOWN. It was a boy-child, perhaps a big three and surely no more than five. On his face was an expression to which Sheridan had become exquisitely attuned. He was trying not to cry but soon would.

Sheridan paused for a moment, feeling the familiar soft wave of self-disgust... though every time he took a child, that feeling grew a little less urgent. The first time he had slept for a week. He kept thinking about that big greasy Turk who called himself Mr. Wizard, kept wondering what he did with the children.

"They go on a boat-ride, Mr. Sheridan," the Turk told him, only it came out Dey goo on a bot-rahd, Messtair Shurdunn. The Turk smiled. And if you know what's good for you, you won't ask any more about it, that smile said, and it said it loud and clear, without an accent.

Sheridan hadn't asked any more, but that didn't mean he hadn't kept wondering. Especially afterward. Tossing and turning, wishing he had the whole thing to do over again so he could turn it around, so he could walk away from temptation. The second time had been almost as bad... the third time a little less... and by the fourth time he had almost stopped wondering about the botrahd, and what might be at the end of it for the little kids.

Sheridan pulled his van into one of the handicap parking spaces right in front of the mall. He had one of the special license plates the state gave to cripse on the back of his van. That plate was worth its weight in gold, because it kept any mall security cop from getting suspicious, and those spaces were so convenient and almost always empty.

You always pretend you're not going out looking, but you always lift a crip plate a day or two before.

Never mind all that bullshit; he was in a jam and that kid over there could solve some very big problems.

He got out and walked toward the kid, who was looking around with increasing panic. Yes, Sheridan thought, he was five all right, maybe even six -- just very frail. In the harsh fluorescent glare thrown through the glass doors the boy looked parchment-white, not just scared but perhaps physically ill. Sheridan reckoned it was just big fear, however. Sheridan usually recognized that look when he saw it, because he'd seen a lot of big fear in his own mirror over the last year and a half or so.

The kid looked up hopefully at the people passing around him, people going into the mall eager to buy, coming out laden with packages, their faces dazed, almost drugged, with something they probably thought was satisfaction.

The kid, dressed in Tuffskin jeans and a Pittsburgh Penguins tee-shirt, looked for help, looked for somebody to look at him and see something was wrong, looked for someone to ask the right question -- You get separated from your dad, son? would do -- looking for a friend.

Here I am, Sheridan thought, approaching. Here I am, sonny -- I'll be your friend. He had almost reached the kid when he saw a mall rent-a-cop ambling slowly up the concourse toward the doors. He was reaching in his pocket, probably for a pack of cigarettes. He would come out, see the boy, and there would go Sheridan's sure thing.

Shit, he thought, but at least he wouldn't be seen talking to the kid when the cop came out. That would have been worse.

Sheridan drew back a little and made a business of feeling in his own pockets, as if to make sure he still had his keys. His glance flicked from the boy to the security cop and back to the boy. The boy had started to cry. Not all-out bawling, not yet, but great big tears that looked pinkish in the reflected glow of the red COUSINTOWN sign as they tracked down his smooth cheeks.

The girl in the information booth flagged down the cop and said something to him. She was pretty, dark-haired, about twenty-five; he was sandy-blonde with a moustache. As the cop leaned on his elbows, smiling at her, Sheridan thought they looked like the cigarette ads you saw on the backs of magazines. Salem Spirit. Light My Lucky. He was dying out here and they were in there making chit-chat -- whatcha doin after work, ya wanna go and get a drink at that new place, and blah-blah-blah.
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