

Drive by Cheryl Sease – 4th Place Winner

Melissa stole the pantyhose at a dollar store. I told her to get the large size to make sure they fit. I waited outside in the car. It was an old Chrysler that drove like a boat, but you could fit anything in it. We kept formula, diapers, and blankets in the back next to the car seat. The other stuff, our clothes and things, we piled in the trunk.

We stopped at another store for a butcher knife. We had to pick up a set to get the big one I wanted. I slipped the package under my coat while Melissa distracted the clerk by buying a quart of milk. After that, we got a hamburger from a drive-through. I stuffed it in my pocket.

Our last five bucks went for gas. It was enough for the time being. After that, I parked at a mall so we could rest a while. That's all we ever did in this old Chrysler. Drive and park. Go here, go there. Our rolling home. We shared the milk, and I pulled the blankets from the back. We already knew how to get comfortable in the Chrysler, so it wasn't long before we fell asleep. When we woke at midnight, it looked like the moon in the parking lot, all deserted and gray under the lights.

The Chrysler started on the third try, and we drove to Taco Town. We needed to get there before it closed. I parked out of sight of the security camera. Right away the smoke from the tailpipe drifted up around us in a cloud as the Chrysler idled. I turned off the car before we choked to death and prayed it would start when we needed it to.

Melissa's fingers slipped on the plastic as she tried to open the pantyhose, and she finally tore it open with her teeth. I didn't do much better with the knives. I yanked open the package. It was one those hard plastic kind. When it gave, all the knives jumped into my lap. We were so nerved up, Melissa and I burst out laughing. She picked up the knives by their handles and fit them back into their places in the plastic. I kept the butcher knife.

We settled down, and Melissa took my hand. I laced my fingers with hers. We could always say a lot with the rub of a fingertip or a squeeze of a hand, and we were talking like crazy in the dark.

A few minutes later, right before the store closed, I opened the car door.

“Be careful, Charlie.”

“I will. Something goes wrong, you get out of here. Remember?” I gave her hand a little shake before I let go of it.

She nodded. Her lower lip was trembling. I got out and slammed the door. Melissa slid behind the wheel. She wiped at her eyes. I walked with my head down toward the building.

At the door, I pulled one leg of the pantyhose over my head. The second leg hung around my shoulders like a snake. When I went inside, the spare leg got caught in the door jam. I yanked it free and tried to adjust the one on my face so I could see, all this while I tried not to poke myself in the eye with the butcher knife.

There were three workers behind the counter. I could see them staring at me while I fought with the pantyhose. The girl snickered. Once I pulled myself together, I waved the knife. There's something about a big knife that commands attention. They all bunched together and looked as scared as I needed them to.

"Err da munny?" I said.

It was pretty easy to disguise my voice. My lips could barely move. They got what I meant. The guy nearest the door dug in each register for cash. I grabbed a paper sack from a pile and handed it to him. Once the drawers were empty and the cash was stuffed in the bag, I pointed the knife at them again.

"Onna for!"

They flopped to the floor, face down. The girl was crying. I hated that. She was just some kid trying to make a buck, and I wanted to tell her not to worry, that I would never hurt her. I backed away. At the exit, I gathered the legs of the pantyhose, the bag, and the knife close to my chest and ran outside, pounding the glass door with my shoulder on the way through. I banged my knee on the Chrysler's bumper as I rounded the car and half hopped the rest of the way, pulling at the pantyhose as I went. I slid into the passenger side and slammed the door.

Melissa turned the key, and the Chrysler started first try. I breathed again. She punched the gas, and we chugged away, leaving a smoke trail. Then we drove without talking to an all-night restaurant and parked again, hiding the Chrysler among the other cars. Melissa pulled the pantyhose the rest of the way off my head. She smoothed my hair and ran her fingers down my cheek. I still held the knife and the bag in a death grip.

"I guess we did it." I shivered for some reason.

"Yeah." Her voice was soft and flat.

I dropped the knife on the floor. Melissa took the bag and counted the cash.

“Oh, Charlie! There’s over a thousand dollars here!”

“No way!”

That was enough money to go anywhere. Now that there was a payoff, it began to be worth being Charlie and Melissa Castle, armed robbers. We were willing to take on the burden, because now we could do the next thing.

The most important thing.

This time we drove to a convenience store. I filled the tank. I was jumpy and sure every noise meant the police had found us. A siren whined in the distance and I tried to hear if it was getting closer or farther away. As the gas pumped, I had time to think about what we had done.

Melissa and I didn’t see that we had another choice. We lived in the Chrysler. I had a minimum-wage job washing dishes. Melissa waited tables. Our paychecks got used up on food, car repairs, and whatever other problem landed on us. I had no family except for grandparents who only recognized me part of the time. Melissa’s family had disowned her when we eloped. They were sure she had been pregnant. The baby came a good eleven months after we were married, but they still refused to see us or their granddaughter.

When Chelsea was born, we couldn’t pay for it. We talked to a social worker who tried to get us some help, but nothing came of it. At the time we had an apartment, but formula and diapers were expensive. Then there were the babysitting costs. We were also trying to catch up from Melissa’s lost salary when she was off with Chelsea.

When Melissa went back to work, we found a nice lady in our building to watch the baby who wasn’t too expensive. Regular paychecks came in again. There was a point where I thought we would make it. Then the store where Melissa worked closed, and she lost her job. It saved on babysitting costs, but we needed every extra dollar. I took a second job but hurt my back doing it, and then I couldn’t work at all. When we couldn’t pay the rent, we were evicted.

It was early spring by then. That’s when we started living in the car with Chelsea, but we took good care of her. She got everything she needed. She was never hungry. It got chilly at night, but we piled on the blankets and held her, and she was never cold.

Except for that one stupid night last April.

We had parked in a grocery store lot. The day had been warm and still was, so I didn't get the blankets from the trunk right away. We fell asleep talking with the baby still in the car seat. Sometime in the night a front came through. It dropped probably twenty degrees, and it got cold. We didn't know it until Chelsea started crying. By then, somebody had called the cops.

They said we weren't taking care of her, that she was cold and shouldn't be in the car. Well one thing led to another, and they took Chelsea to the hospital to check her out, like she was hurt. That same social worker from before came. She fixed it so we didn't get nailed on child endangerment, but we had to give up Chelsea to foster care. Until we got on our feet, she said. So we didn't get Chelsea back, and we didn't get to see her for nearly a month. Melissa got real hard hearted towards me during that time. I think she blamed me or maybe she was sick of our life, or maybe she just missed Chelsea. I only know we spent a lot of time fighting and a lot of time crying.

I got to thinking of that when I was filling the tank, so far away I didn't realize I'd blanked out until the gas nozzle clunked at full. I screwed the cap back on and paid for the gas, careful not to lift my eyes to the clerk's. When I got back in the car, Melissa was on the passenger side. It was time to fix things.

"Let's go get her," I said, and she smiled at me.

There's a point where you get really mad at how unfair things are, and I was there. I blamed social workers and Melissa's parents and anybody else who hadn't helped us. Because of them, now we were felons on top of everything else, having to steal our daughter back if we wanted her. I didn't want to break the law. I didn't want to live out of my car. I only wanted that sad look gone from Melissa's eyes and for us to not fight anymore. I wanted our daughter back. I pictured Chelsea with her foster family and burned inside.

We knew where Chelsea was, of course. It was a nice enough place, and at first we told ourselves it was a good idea. We only got to see her every other week, but she was safe and fed. But even after all summer, we couldn't make ends meet, and it irked me to see the foster parents smiling and making faces at her like she belonged to them. Like they had ownership and were showing her off.

One day we went to visit Chelsea, and she cried when they handed her to us. We were afraid she would never remember us as her parents by the time we got her back, so we planned the robbery we had done and the kidnapping we were about to do. Once we had Chelsea back, we would drive away. Drive so far and so fast that we would leave our bad luck behind.

It turned out it was no more of a problem to steal Chelsea than it was to rob Taco Town, maybe less. I parked a street away, on the other side of a park behind the foster home. I walked across the field and

snuck in through the back yard, and blessed the luck that met me. The neighbor's dog was inside tonight and wouldn't bark. There was no need for the hamburger in my pocket.

I pulled out wire cutters and made quick work of the screen on the nursery window. I used a paring knife to pry up the sash. I'm not a big guy, so it was easy for me to slip through the window. The room was lit by a night light. I turned off the baby monitor and shut the bedroom door as quietly as I could. I picked up the baby, wrapped her in a blanket, and was back out of the house in maybe a minute.

Chelsea started to whimper as I started running. I crossed the park behind the house and was panting by the time I got to the car. Melissa rolled down the window, and I handed the baby to her. She grinned like crazy while she rocked Chelsea to quiet her. For the first time in months I felt the weight lift off my back. I started the car and drove off, waiting to turn on the headlights until I was a few blocks away.

I found the nearest road out of town. I pulled the hamburger from my pocket and handed it to Melissa. She took a couple of bites and gave it back to me to finish. After a while, I quit checking the rearview mirror so often. I glanced at Chelsea and Melissa now and then. The sadness was gone from Melissa's voice as she talked to the baby. Chelsea was gurgling. It was like music to me. I forgot about police cars and robberies and let myself enjoy listening to Melissa sing and to Chelsea's little baby noises. Right that minute, it was the most love I ever felt for them.

On a county road outside of town, I saw a dirt track leading into a stand of trees and parked there. I got out and reorganized things in the backseat. Melissa grabbed the diapers and put the baby on the front seat to change her.

Then Melissa screamed. "*Charlie!*"

Her voice sounded wretched. Like the life had been jerked from her. I couldn't think what was wrong, but I felt like somebody had gut punched me. Tears were rolling off Melissa's cheeks. She held the used diaper in one hand and a new one in the other. I leaned over the seat and looked at the baby then, lying under the dome light on a blanket.

What a beautiful little boy he was.

"*Where's Chelsea?*" Melissa said through gritted teeth.

Like I knew! I skidded through details in my head. The street names. How the house looked in the dark. Which window belonged to the nursery. Everything was right. The neighbor's dog had even been inside.

I looked at Melissa and shrugged. It was the only answer I had.

