

All the Years of Her Life
by Morley Callaghan

The drug store was beginning to close for the night. Young Alfred Higgins who worked in the store was putting on his coat, getting ready to go home. On his way out, he passed Mr. Sam Carr, the little gray hair man who owned the store. Mr. Carr looked up at Alfred as he passed and said in a very soft voice, "Just a moment, Alfred, one moment before you go."

Mr. Carr spoke so quietly that he worried Alfred. "What is it, Mr. Carr?"

"Maybe you'd be good enough to take a few things out of your pockets and leave them here before you go." Said Mr. Carr.

"What things? What are you talking about?"

"You've got a compact and a lipstick and at least two tubes of toothpaste in your pockets, Alfred."

"What do you mean?" Alfred answered. "Do you think I am crazy?" His face got red.

Mr. Carr kept looking at Alfred, coldly. Alfred did not know what to say and tried to keep his eyes from meeting the eyes of his boss. After a few moments, he put his hand into his pockets and took out the things he had stolen.

"Petty thieving, eh, Alfred?" said Mr. Carr. "And maybe you'd be good enough to tell me how long this has been going on."

"This is the first time I ever took anything."

Mr. Carr was quick to answer, "So now you think you tell me a lie? What kind of a fool do I look like, hah? I don't know what

goes on in my own store, eh? I/ tell you, you have been doing this for a long time." Mr. Carr had a strange smile on his face. "I don't like to call the police," he said, "but maybe I should call your father and let him know I'm going to have to put you in jail."

"My father is not home, he is a printer, he works nights."

"Who is at home?" Mr. Carr asked.

"My mother, I think."

Mr. Carr started to go to the phone. Alfred's fears made him raise his voice. He wanted to show he was afraid of nobody. He acted this way every time he got into trouble. This had happened many times since he left school. At such times, he always spoke in a loud voice as he did tonight.

"Just a minute!" He said to Mr. Carr. "You don't have to get anybody else into this, you don't have to tell her." Alfred tried to sound big, but deep down he was like a child. He hoped that someone at home would come quickly to save him. But Mr. Carr was already talking to his mother, he told her to come to the store in a hurry.

Alfred thought his mother would come rushing in, eyes burning with anger. Maybe she would be crying and would push him away when he tried to explain to her. She would make him feel so small. Yet he wanted her to come quickly before Mr. Carr called in a policeman.

Alfred and Mr. Carr waited but said nothing, at last they heard someone at the closed door. Mr. Carr opened it and said, "Come in, Mrs. Higgins." His face was hard and serious. Alfred's mother came in with a friendly smile on her face and put out her hand to Mr. Carr and said politely, "I am Mrs. Higgins, Alfred's mother."

Mr. Carr was surprised at the way she came in. She was very calm, quiet and friendly. "Is Alfred in trouble?" Mrs. Higgins asked.

"He is, he has been taking things from the store, little things like toothpaste and lipsticks, things he can easily sell."

Mrs. Higgins looked at her son and said sadly, "Is it so, Alfred?"

"Yes".

"Why have you been doing it?" she asked.

"I've been spending money, I believe."

"On what?"

"Going around with the boys, I guess." said Alfred.

Mrs. Higgins put out her hand and touched Mr. Carr's arm with great gentleness as if she knew just how he felt. She spoke as if she did not want to cause him any more trouble. She said, "If you will just listen to me before doing anything." Her voice was cool and she turned her head away as if she had said too much already. Then she looked again at Mr. Carr with a pleasant smile and asked, "What do you want to do, Mr. Carr?"

"I was going to get a cop. That is what I should do, call a police."

She answered, "Yes, I think so, it's not for me to say because he is my son. Yet I sometimes think a little good advice is the best thing for a boy at certain times in his life."

Mrs. Higgins looks like a different woman to her son Alfred.

There she was with a gentle smile saying, "I wonder if you don't think it would be better just to let him come home with me. He looks like a big fellow, doesn't he? Yet it takes some of them a long time to get any sense into their heads."

Mr. Carr had expected Alfred's mother to come in nervously, shaking with fear, asking with wet eyes for a mercy for her son, but no, she was most calm and pleasant and was making Mr. Carr feel guilty.

After a time, Mr. Carr was shaking his head in agreement with what she was saying. "Of course," he said, "I don't want to be cruel. I'll tell you what I'll do. Tell your son not to come back here again, and let it go at that, how is that?" And he warmly shook Mrs. Higgins's hand.

"I will never forget your kindness. Sorry we had to meet this way," said Mr. Carr. "But I'm glad I got in touch with you, just wanted to do the right thing, that is all."

"It's better to meet like this than never, isn't it?" She said.

Suddenly they held hands as if they liked each other, as if they had known each other for a long time.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Mrs. Higgins. I'm truly sorry."

Mother and son left. They walked along the street in silence. She took long steps and looked straight in front of her. After a time, Alfred said, "Thank God it turned out like that, never again!"

"Be quiet, don't speak to me, you have shamed me enough, have the decency to be quiet."

They reached home at last. Mrs. Higgins took off her coat and without even looking at him, she said to Alfred, "You are a bad luck. God forgive you. It is one thing after another, always has been. Why do you stand there so stupidly? go to bed."

As she went into the kitchen, she said, "Not a word about tonight to your father."

In his bedroom, Alfred heard his mother in the kitchen. There was no shame in him, just pride in his mother's strength. "She was smooth!" he said to himself. He felt he must tell her how great she was. As he got to the kitchen, he saw his mother drinking a cup of tea. He was shocked by what he saw.

His mother's face, as she said, was a frightened, broken face. It was not the same cool, bright face he saw earlier in the drug store. As Mrs. Higgins lifted the tea cup, her hand shook. And some of the tea splashed on the table. Her lips moved nervously. She looked very old.

He watched his mother without making a sound. The picture of his mother made him want to cry. He felt his youth coming to an end. He saw all the troubles he brought his mother in her shaking hand and the deep lines of worry in her grey face. It seemed to him that this was the first time he had ever really seen his mother.