

# Spring

*“Youth is like spring,  
an over-praised season more  
remarkable for biting winds  
than genial breezes.”*

~Samuel Butler



## Scout Gets Her Tongue Back

SCOUT HASN'T TALKED IN FIVE YEARS. Though she makes sounds that get her grandmother's attention. Teddy holds her gently and smooths her hair. She whispers softly into her ear.

"It's all right, baby. It's all right," she says. "Shush now. Teddy's here."

Scout wriggles out of her arms and stares into her worn eyes. Teddy looks like her mom, pretty but like a Raggedy Ann doll. She dresses like Raggedy Ann, too, her clothes blousy and colourful—yet dingy. Her hair is long and stringy. Now it's covered with a vibrant scarf, and she wears a flowered nightgown.

Scout longs to tell Teddy about the bad dream that woke her—her dad carrying her mom through the living room, her with limp, dangling arms and eyes popped wide open. She feels the tears streaming down her face. She opens her mouth, searches for the voice deep within herself. She can almost feel it at the pit of her stomach, but she can't force it to

move up to her throat and come out of her mouth, even if she moves her lips.

Scout curls up on the pillow. "It's all right, baby," Teddy says again, caressing her. "It will come. Try to go back to sleep." She feels her grandma's warm presence and can hear her breathing. She closes her eyes.

Scout remembers the day she last talked, which is also the day she last saw her parents. But she isn't sure whether her last words were spoken or just thought.

"Nothing, Daddy," she had said or thought. "Nothing. Just Mommy in your arms."

Like in the dream, she had seen her dad carrying her mom, but her mom was awake, her big eyes shiny like quarters. Also, Scout thought for sure she had been smiling. It was nice to see them acting like Mommy and Daddy again. A little earlier they had been fussing and fighting terribly.

That morning, shortly after the doorbell rang, Scout heard her mother shouting.

"I am still young, damn it," she said. "I should have never married your old ass." Her cursing made Scout's chest pound. It would only make her father angrier. He didn't like swearing.

"Watch your filthy mouth," he said. "You are going to find yourself without her if you keep this up."

"I'm sick of your threats!" she screamed. "Who are you to threaten me? She's my baby, too. I had her—or have you forgotten?"

Scout's stomach tightened as they neared her room. She had rushed from the bathroom only moments ago and struggled into the ugly dress her mom said she had to wear, even if she didn't like it.

"No," Scout had said. "I want to wear my jeans."

Alternate Saturdays she slouched, played basketball, watched television. But this was not an alternate Saturday. It was her time to be with her father and wear ugly dresses made of silk and satin with big bows and sashes.

"Get up, Scout!" her mom had said.

"Why do I have to do what he says?" Scout asked, noticing that her mom was wearing a short black sundress and high heels. "You don't."

Her mom gripped her face and stared at her with big, round eyes. "Your father is not my father, he is yours. Now stop sassing me and get up!"

Scout had allowed herself to be marched to the bathroom, but now she was back in her room, dreading their entrance.

Her father looked like the tall and skinny man in the circus, performing an act. He wore a long, white coat and a stethoscope around his neck. He shot her a fake smile and stopped short of her. He noticed the yellow M&Ms wrapper on the dresser.

"What is all this?" He tossed the wrapper in the air. It floated to the floor, making Scout dizzy. "What is it?"

Scout kept quiet, watching her mom open and close drawers and shove clothes into her bag. She had already scolded Scout about eating the candy in the middle of the night. Sometimes she acted like she didn't notice when Scout ate junk, but when her dad was coming around, she got mad. He was a doctor. He didn't like junk food.

"Somebody answer me!" her father shouted.

Though her mom had tidied the rest of the room earlier, hiding her softball and baseball bat in her toy chest, Scout's basketball was in the middle of the floor, and her blue blanket with imprints of basketballs lay across the arm of her rocking chair. Still ignoring her father, her mom picked up the blanket and crammed it into the bag.

Her dad pulled it out and flung it across the room. "She's not a boy, Zelda," he snapped. "Anyhow, she's too big for a blanket."

"You tell her that," her mother said, reaching for the blanket.

"Okay, I will," he said and looked at Scout. Then he grabbed her mother by her thin arm and yanked her close to him.

Her mother's eyes widened. She tried to pull herself away, but he dragged her closer.

"You been smoking around her," he said. Scout lowered her gaze. She had smelled her mom's cigarette breath this morning when she hugged her.

“Why do you smoke?” Scout had asked then. “Daddy says cigarettes are bad for you.”

“He’s right,” she said. “Sometimes Mommy gets it wrong, but you don’t have to follow. Do as Daddy tells you. Remember, he is your father, not mine!”

Now their voices jerked Scout out of her thoughts and brought her back into the hot room.

“I have told you for the last time that your behaviour is unacceptable. I’ve got a good mind not to bring her back here.”

“You can’t do that!” her mom yelled.

Scout tripped over her basketball and slipped on the floor. Although she did not feel any pain, she felt embarrassed, so she cried. Her dad picked her up, and her mom pulled at her. They tussled over her, making her cry even more.

Her dad pushed her mom away and hauled Scout to his Jeep. Her mom trailed them, hitting him with her fists. Mrs. Maple, the neighbor, was standing at the fence, her eyes fixed on them. Her two long plaits hung to her shoulders.

Mrs. Maple turned away and went back inside. But her cat pulled at Scout’s dad’s pants leg and stared at him with green fierce eyes. He stomped, and the cat scrambled. Hurriedly, her dad put her in the car and told her to stay. Her mom huffed off and rushed back into the house. Her dad ran after her, and from what Scout could tell he pushed his way in.

The car was nice and cool. She listened to the humming engine, feeling her heart settle down.

Scout had witnessed such fights before, but this one seemed to go on forever. She waited and waited. She tried to think of something other than her mom and dad. But she couldn't, so she got out and tiptoed back to the front door. That's when she saw him carrying her mother across the living room towards the bedroom, but it wasn't like the nightmare. Her mom seemed lively.

Her face plastered to the screen door, Scout waited. She felt hot, like a doll melting. Then her father came rushing into the hallway but stopped abruptly when he saw Scout and dropped a plastic bucket.

Her dad's eyes were wild, like the wolves she had seen on television. He hurried toward her and burst through the door, yelling, "How long have you been here, Scout?"

She fished for an answer, but her voice was stuck in her stomach. He grabbed her and shook her until she cried.

"What did you see?" he demanded.

That's when she said—or thought she said—she saw him carrying her mom.

"Never speak of this again," he said, now squeezing her arms. "Never!"

She was about to tell him he was hurting her, but somehow he sensed it. His look softened. With sweaty

hands, he pulled her close to him, squeezed her until he hurt her even more. He whispered over and over again, “Daddy never meant to hurt you.”

Scout felt what was left of her voice at the pit of her stomach. Her dad picked her up and rushed her to the car.

Scout didn't remember much about the drive, except that it was eerily quiet and the air smelled of gasoline. Her stomach hurt most of the time. Her father gave her more medicine, maybe Pepto-Bismol, like her mom had given her that morning when she said her stomach hurt from eating the M&Ms. It soothed her and made her sleep.

She woke up when they stopped once or maybe twice to eat or to use the bathroom. He took her to McDonald's for food and into the boys' bathroom. Neither of them spoke.

In the car, he drove fast and listened to the radio. He flipped the dial repeatedly. And he talked on his cellular phone in a language that Scout did not understand.

They drove for a long time. When they got to where they were going, her grandpa's house, which they normally flew to, she saw police cars everywhere. Her grandfather—a doctor, too—came outside and stared at them through watery eyes. In his blue jean overalls, he looked older than Scout remembered.

Her grandfather told her father he was glad his mother wasn't alive to witness his downfall. Then he took Scout by the hand and led her into the house.

That day was the last time she saw either of her parents.



The next morning, Scout is glad it's Saturday. She doesn't have to go to that crazy school, where the children are unruly. Some can't walk; others can't talk very well, but they still tease her that the cat has got her tongue.

She hates her school and thinks about her old one all the time. She wishes she could go back there. She wishes her mom hadn't died.

Now, though, she goes outside to get the mail. Immediately, she notices a dead bird on the walkway. Ants crawl over its flesh. It looks as if someone has skinned it, perhaps only this morning. It lies on its side, a wing broken.

Scout pulls the skirt of her denim dress between her legs. Stoops to get a closer view and whiffs the bird's smell. It smells fresh, like the air on a hot day. She wonders if her mom smelled like this after she died instead of cigarette smoke mixed with sweet perfume.