

ELIZABETH SPENCER

Sightings

Mason Everett, a man who lived mostly happily in his own mind, hadn't any idea why his daughter Tabitha had come to visit him. It's true they never saw much of each other. Maybe it was a shame. He was neutral on the subject. He had long loved her at a distance, but now she was close she brought back shadows. Still he was willing to find out what she wanted. Her mother, in far-off Maryland, was maybe the one to ask. On the other hand her mother might be the very reason she headed his way. She arrived about twilight in a cab from the airport.

"But I would have met you," he protested.

"Too much trouble," she answered and came right in with her duffel. She looked like all the rest of the ones her age, but also bore a resemblance both to him and Celie. He remembered that when young he too had done unexpected things. She went upstairs to the spare room. She shut the door. Mason waited downstairs and thought about dinner.

Other ideas trundled through his head. Was she into a love affair, was she on drugs, did she drink, did she need money? If she needed money, why did she take a taxi from the airport? Everything went in a circle until he heard her step on the stair coming down. She drifted around the living room. Did not turn on the TV. "How is your mother?" he inquired. Tabby said her mother was okay. He had not counted on monosyllables. He tried several other directions but finally gave up. "Is a steak all right?" She said yes. She also said, when asked, that she liked it medium.

During dinner he asked if she was in school. She replied that she had had to leave. "Had to leave?" he repeated, inviting her to explain. But she did not say anything more.

Mason wondered why he didn't push her further, but then of course he knew why. It was a habit formed long ago, not to go too deep, not to quarrel. If they quarreled, they would get back to the accident, that blue blinding flash, that had brought guilt in, and blame, wordless until her mother got into it and a real quarrel

started, the kind that spiraled downward till it reached a depth charge.

He was walking his dog Jasper the next evening when old Mrs. Simpson, who occupied her front porch as a regular thing, called out, "I hear your daughter's with you."

"Yes, ma'am," Mason answered, adding, "She can walk the dog."

She had walked Jasper twice now, once with Mason, once alone. He seemed content in his private way. Airedale mix, had looked forlorn in the shelter when Mason chose him out of others. But choosing didn't change him; he still looked forlorn. Tabby didn't pet him but seemed to like him.

"What's her name?" asked Mrs. Simpson.

"Tabitha. We call her Tabby."

"Tabby and Jasper," said Mrs. Simpson.

Mason agreed that was it.

In the years since Cecilia left, Mason had framed up his life in an adequate way. He missed her but not what she had turned into. But he liked a woman to be somewhere in his life; and when passing through one of the town malls, he observed a likely one who owned a knitting and handwork shop. She was doing some sort of fancy stitching when he walked in. He introduced himself and found she knew him already. She had had some acquaintance with Celie. He said that Celie had moved away. Yes, they were separated. Too bad, she said, but things happened. Her name was Marsha. He asked if he could call her. She thought a minute and then laid aside a bright length of wool to write down her number. So it was easy as that. She had had two husbands, both long gone. He agreed that things did happen. Though he didn't see her often, he liked to know she was there.

Tabby began to catch the bus in the afternoon and to be absent until dark. He didn't ask where she went. But one afternoon he called Marsha, who didn't work on Thursdays. Mostly, he wanted to talk about Tabby.

"Can't you call her mother? Seems to me her mother should have called you."

"She did call. The evening Tabby arrived. I said, 'Yes, she's here. Yes, she's fine.' I hung up."

"You ought to have asked some questions."

“That’s the very thing I don’t want. I don’t want Celie’s side. I want Tabby to tell me what she wants to when she wants to tell it. None of this ought-to business.”

Marsha laughed. “Well then you’ll just keep rocking along for months and years.” She sat in her big chair, doing handwork.

“It’s fine with me,” said Mason and added, “She likes Jasper.”

“Does Jasper like her?”

“He doesn’t say.”

“How old is Tabby?”

He counted back. “About sixteen, I think.” He grinned, sheepish. “Actually, I’d have to look it up. I forget.”

“I think you just better come right out and ask her what the problem is.”

He didn’t really want to. He remembered the terrible day she had blinded him, the flash of blue light in his face when he was trying to fix the electrical motor for her CD player. He was threading the wires together, holding them close to squint at when she had connected the plug to the outlet. His eye streamed water and blood, and she yowled *I’m sorry* till her mother made her stop. It seemed to him every time he looked at her, she was yowling it yet, for his sight never entirely came back. Did it matter? He could read and work as he did before. The surgery had been delicate, one eye all but blind, the other intricately damaged. The accident gave him the chance to work at home instead of at the office. He wore glasses with thick hexagonal lenses and had to have special equipment to work with figures. Insurance supplied the major expense. So what did it matter in the long run? Sight-damaged people went successfully through life. It was well known. But he read it as a constant theme in his daughter’s eyes whenever they met his, never to be erased. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry*. And instead of *It’s okay, forget it*, he said now, *Why are you here?* No answers so far, but as Marsha told him, he had to try.

Tabitha had volunteered to cook dinner and turned out something done with hamburger meat that was edible. When he had praised her and eaten enough, she brought out some ice cream, and he ate that too.

“Listen, honey,” he started. “We’ve got to talk.”

She looked up. He thought he heard *I’m sorry*.

“I haven’t asked you yet. I was too glad to see you. But why did you come? Just to visit? No other reason?”

She played with her spoon. She let Jasper lick it clean. She leaned to pet him. "It's mother," she said.

"Well, what about her?"

"She wants to marry somebody. I think he's terrible."

"Terrible or not, I can't stop her. What's his name?"

"Mr. Bowden." She winced on the word. "I told her, if he didn't leave, I would. She got mad. I think he's an alien."

"From where?"

"Outer space alien."

"Oh." After a silence he said, "But if she's happy with him . . ."

"Nobody could be," said Tabby.

He sighed. He was a little bit jealous; unavoidable, he supposed.

"Have you heard from her?"

"I told her I was coming here. She was mad and shaking."

"She gets like that," he recalled, speaking half to himself.

The next day Tabitha got a letter. Mason, who went for the post, saw it before she did. The lettering of the address was stiffly upright, like printing. He gave it to her to open, and she read it aloud.

I know your mamma misses you, she says so all the time. I wish you would come back. We can all go out to restaurants and the movies. You wouldn't have to go unless you want to.

*Your friend,
Guy Bowden*

"You see what he's like?" asked Tabby.

"Maybe he means it," said Mason.

"He's stupid," said Tabby.

They alternated cooking. Tabitha improved. Mason asked Marsha to dinner. Tabitha wore a bright blouse, brought up out of that bottomless duffel. She ironed her jeans and put on lipstick. She made a veal concoction, which was edible. Mason opened some wine.

"I'll teach you to sew," Marsha offered.

"Maybe I ought to learn," said Tabitha and got dreamy.

"She's like you," Marsha told Mason. "She's pretty though."

“Are you going to marry her?” Tabitha inquired later on.

“Nothing like that,” Mason replied.

“What you mean, ‘like that’? You sleep together, don’t you?”

“Mainly we’re just friends.”

It was a week since she came. Jasper now slept in her room, lying near the door sill. Sometimes he snored.

There was bound to be a foray.

When the phone call came, Mason was alone in the house and had no idea what to say. “I can’t direct you here unless you tell me where you are.” It was Celie, traveling with Guy Bowden. She thought they should all get together and talk. “We’ve got to understand things,” she said. She had forgotten how to get to the house. The new highway had confused her sense of direction. They had stopped at a mini-mart to telephone. Mason knew where it was.

“Tabby’s not here now,” he floundered. “Get something to eat and call us back.”

“We’ve eaten already,” Celie wailed. She had taken on her desperate sound.

“Everett! Guy Bowden here.” The voice was commanding. “We would like to see you.”

Mason hung up. He wasn’t going to be bossed around. Where was Tabby? Letting Celie know he’d no idea where she was—that would cause a flare-up. He shrugged into a jacket and took Jasper for a walk, hoping to think things over.

When he turned the corner to return home, he saw the strange car parked in front of the house, also Tabby, approaching from the bus stop. And now he freely saw what he had been thinking all along without knowing it: *It’s her and me. It’s WE. And they are THEM.* Big question: *Did Tabby think so too?* In just one week it might have happened.

He hastened to her, heart beating with unexpected love that now came on full force, out in the open. How urgent it was. To love and to know.

“Honey,” he said, “it’s your mother.”

“Oh, God,” said Tabby and thrilled him.

He caught her hand. Jasper wagged to see her. They huddled, a party of three.

“I bet he’s with her,” said Tabby, adding, “Let’s go somewhere else.”

It seemed such a good idea that Mason almost thought it might work. But he was not entirely lawless yet, and they went in.

They were both in the living room. Celie looked as if she still belonged here and had just told Guy Bowden to sit down. That was the first thing. The next was how nice they both looked. Mason recognized that he and Tabby did not look nice. They looked scruffy.

Guy Bowden was a beefy fellow, large arms, thick legs, heavy feet. But wearing a nicely pressed grey suit, a satin tie. Celie was trim, she was a word he used to think about her: petite. It rhymed with neat. That was long ago when he was proud of her.

Guy Bowden was looking all around without approval; but when Mason and Tabitha entered, he at least stood up. Celie had rushed to Tabby, who now was getting her hug. Jasper growled.

“Leaving me!” Celie wailed. “It’s been just awful, you leaving me!”

“Your mother’s desperate,” Guy Bowden said and sat back down.

“How about some coffee?” Mason offered. “How about a drink?”

So was he being weak? It was what she accused him of, often in the past.

Tabitha got glasses and poured them out some Diet Coke.

“The lawn looks nice,” said Celie, as though she had jurisdiction.

“I still have Aaron,” Mason said.

“Don’t feel up to it?” Guy inquired.

“Don’t really like it,” Mason admitted.

“Tabitha, we’ve come to take you home with us,” Celie said firmly, and though it once may have worked, Mason saw it wasn’t going to work now. She’s grown up, he wanted to say, but didn’t.

Tabby sat on a footstool with her arm over Jasper’s neck. “Suppose I don’t want to?” she said.

“Well, now,” Guy pronounced, “there’s been a legal agreement, as I understand it, and I think you have to, young lady.” He spoke in a teasing way.

“I’m not going,” said Tabitha.

They were silent.

Mason Everett regarded his ex-wife, judging that she hadn’t changed all that much. He wondered to what degree he had

changed. He wouldn't doubt he was showing his age. More wrinkles, a haircut overdue. Celie worked at exercises, she tried different diets, she measured her waist. She talked a blue streak about uninteresting things. She was talking now. There was a group she belonged to. They discussed single parents, problems with preschool children, problems with school-age children, problems with adolescents. They called in experts and listened to lectures. There was this interesting woman from Canada. . . .

"What do you do here?" Guy Bowden asked Tabitha, leaning forward. He sounded intently kind.

She took her time about answering, then said, "I'm studying at the library. I'm going to go to college."

"Oh that's great!" said Celie. "I'm glad of that! But you can do that back home! I'll arrange it for you."

"I'm going to do it here," said Tabby.

It came to Mason that this was all a lie. He didn't know where she spent her time when she left the house, but it was the freedom sense he saw in her. He thought that was what she took with her wherever she went. It was what he wanted her to have.

Celie turned to Mason. "So you're doing that for her?" She seemed shocked.

"First I've heard of it," said Mason, "but if she wants it—sure."

"Taking things away from me," Celie said and sprouted tears.

So they would be back into it, Mason thought, and saw the whole flawed fabric of human relations form, the present now becoming like the past, the future scrolling out ahead looking just as always, torn, stained, blemished. No change. He winced.

"How are your eyes?" asked Celie.

"Same as always." Silence.

For Guy Bowden, the moment had arrived. He leaned toward Tabby as if he were right in her face.

"Tabitha, you've got to understand that your mother and I just want the best for you, and what we think is that the best, the very best, is coming back to us. I know I upset you with some things I said. I'm just a rough fellow sometimes. But my heart's in the right place. If you only knew how I mean that. More than you could ever know. I mean it! I mean it! And where is my heart? It's right with you, honey. With you and your mother, she's just so fine."

Tabitha and Jasper both looked at him. Mason tried to look elsewhere.

“Don’t you see, Mason?” Celie appealed.

“I think it’s up to her,” said Mason.

“Unfortunately, it is not up to her,” Guy said. “I mean as I understand it, you two agreed—”

Tabitha jumped up and ran in the kitchen.

Guy Bowden rose with resolution and followed her, his heavy feet like a marching drum. They could hear his voice, muffled but persuading, “Now sweetheart, you just need to listen. And think . . . you need to think . . .”

Mason and Celie were left alone.

“Is he what you want?” he inquired.

“He’s just so good to me,” she explained.

Now was the moment to say, *So you think I wasn’t good to you*. But he didn’t. He’d had enough of that. What is separation, together or apart, but one long silence?

Two birds chirped outside the window. It did sound like a conversation, he thought, and wondered what they were saying. From the kitchen they heard something shrill, a sound as if it came from a stranger.

Tabitha ran. She shot through the hallway and was out the front door, running like a deer. Jasper was right after her, he made it through the door. Maybe he thought she was playing.

Mason jumped right in front of Guy Bowden, who was chasing her. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“She’s the one.” Bowden was rubbing at his face. Had she hit him?

“I was trying to be nice to her. Damn it all, I’m always trying to be nice to her. She won’t let me.”

Mason walked out the door. He looked up and down the street, but neither dog nor girl was in sight. She could have made it around the corner, or into the next yard. But which one? He called her once, “Tabby!” then decided not to call again. It was exactly as if she’d caught the bus. He stood on the sidewalk, looking all around. Next Celie and Bowden would come to the door and start talking.

He walked deliberately away. From the door Celie called after him. “Mason! Where are you going?”

“I have to find her,” he said, not looking back.

He did look for her quite some time. No Tabby, no Jasper

either. He telephoned Marsha. Marsha said that Tabby was there, but she hadn't seen Jasper.

Mason got the car and drove to find them. Tabby was in the kitchen eating cake. The three of them sat and thought things over. No Jasper.

"Aren't you allowed to have her with you at all?" Marsha asked in an experienced way, two divorces and a grown son somewhere.

"It was something I could have arranged. But they let me know a fixed arrangement meant I could only see her at allotted times."

"And you wouldn't?"

"At the time I wouldn't. I was tired fighting. Celie—you see Celie can keep on fighting forever. Nothing stops her."

"Maybe they'll go away," said Tabitha.

"Maybe they'll stay and just keep the house," said Mason.

Mason's reading equipment was in his house, also his workload from the hospital. Mason's present project was research in genetic statistics as related to disease. Figures from the computer flowed under his crafted Dome magnifier, a glass balloon large as a grapefruit. Specially enlarged from his machines, they arrived sometimes in complex pairs, wavered and spread apart; at other times they approached, hesitated, then matched up and marched together. He checked results and tabulated conclusions.

When Tabitha called, Marsha had left her shop with the assistant. She had driven to her house where she found Tabitha, sitting on the steps. Marsha was a good-natured woman, tolerant of human mistakes.

She gave a drink to Mason and a Pepsi to Tabitha. Then she talked in a quiet sort of way, about a time when she had lived out West, married to her former husband. She got out some knitting. In and out, the long needles kept to a steady rhythm.

Yes, it was her second husband she remembered most. Brad. The first she had been too young to evaluate now or ever. The second she had loved deeply, but he had always wanted to travel. His business was mainly in investments for himself and other people. He could carry his office everywhere—a computer, a cell phone—set up every needed connection in fancy motels. This was West Coast life. They journeyed, up into the Northwest—Seattle, Portland, sometimes into Canada. Then he'd take a notion to go south.

Mason sat and watched his daughter with his fragile eyes. If he

only had a vision device to see into her being, discern her aim and direction, for even at so young an age she must feel something of the sort.

“You didn’t want to keep me,” she suddenly accused.

“That was then,” he replied. “This is now.”

Marsha knitted on. She kept journeying on as well. In the south, Brad liked to go to San Diego and especially always took a day or so for Coronado. There was an old resort hotel out there near the beach. He would switch for once from motels just to stay there. The food was good. He never stayed anywhere there wasn’t some special restaurant to explore.

“Didn’t you ever go home?” Mason asked.

“Oh yes, the house. It was in LA. It was nice enough, everything in order. He left it with one of his assistants, a boy who practically lived there. Very nice young man, but then he—” Another story.

It was growing late. The rhythm of the long needles was steady. Tabitha yawned.

Mason was not supposed to drive after dark. Impressions blurred. He sometimes thought he saw someone cross the road in front of him when no one was there. Wary of arriving, he drove slowly home.

“I bet she was going to tell how they went to Mexico next,” Tabitha said.

“Probably.”

Tabitha said she was out of money. He said he would give her some.

He dared then to ask, “Bowden. Did you hit him?”

“No, I bit him. He bent my arm back till it hurt. He did that before. That’s how I got close enough. So I bit him.”

“Why do you go uptown? What do you study?”

“I don’t study. I made that up. I just hang out. I met a boy I liked, but he’s gone away.”

Mason remembered the day they removed bandages from his eyes. He remembered blinking. Though dimly, dimly yet, he could see. He had felt a burst of joy, like a bubble.

He turned into his own street and crept nearer. The visiting car was gone. The house was dark. A shape was waiting at the door.

Tabby gave a cry of delight: “It’s Jasper! He’s come home!”

“And so have you,” said Mason and was happier than he could say to hear no denial.