A KNOWING HEART
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Short Story
Third Place, tie

"I'm getting the back seat tomorrow on the bus, Jill, so you can just be quiet," I said, as I pushed Jill's leg over to her side of the car seat.

"No, you're not. Whoever gets to the bus first gets the seat, and I'll get it cause I can run faster than you."

"We'll see," I shouted at my sister. "I'm older than you and the bus driver said the older kids—and that's me—get the back seats."

"Mother, make Amanda let me sit on the back seat, just one day."

"Listen, girls, if you both don't quit fighting, I may tell the bus driver to just put you on the front seat. Together!" mother said, as she got out of our new Oldsmobile.

"You better listen to your mother," dad said, "I'm getting tired of your bickering every Sunday night about who gets the back seat of the bus."

I knew dad was right. Every Sunday night Jill and me fought as we came home from church about who would get the back seat. I felt like Jill was really stupid to even think she should get the back seat. I had a reason for wanting the seat. Dewayne, the new boy in school, sat next to that seat, and he was so cute. I was determined to get him to notice me. Jill only wanted the back seat so she could stick her tongue out at people in cars behind the bus and throw paper wads at the bus driver. I knew I had better drop the whole thing before I got in trouble, but I was going to get that back seat.

"Honey, did you put some more wood in the fireplace before we went to church?" mother asked, as dad was unlocking the kitchen door.

"Yeah," he said, "it should be warm."

As dad went into the house, I looked back to see mother standing on the steps like a chunk of ice. "Mother," I said, as I shook her, "what is wrong?"

She grabbed my arm, and said, "Get James, I heard something in the house."

"Oh, no, mother, not again. Please tell me you're not thinking there is someone in the house," I said, as I pulled her inside the door.

"Dad, mother's hearing things again," Jill said, as she shoved her way into the house.
“Honey, I didn’t hear a thing. Did you, girls?” dad asked.

Giggling, Jill and I shook our heads. We both knew that mother was a “scaredy cat,” and she imagined all these terrible things. If we ever went anywhere without dad, she would take from her purse a little flashlight, (which she had at all times), and shine it in the back seat of the car before we got in. She said she wanted to make sure no one was hiding in the floor. She even made me and Jill check under the bed before we went to sleep. She didn’t want anyone to get us during the night.

“Well, let’s quit worrying about mother hearing something,” Jill said, pushing her way between me and mother, “I want to watch Archie Bunker.”

“I agree,” dad said, heading straight to the refrigerator.

Mother, who didn’t agree, went into the utility room and opened the closet door. I laughed to myself, thinking what mother would do if somebody jumped out and said BOO!

Well, I was going to have to get to the bathroom. As I headed upstairs, I looked back to see that everyone had taken their post. Jill was lying on the floor with her eyes glued to the T.V. set. Dad was sitting in his recliner, eating a salami sandwich with ketchup, and mother, well, mother was still looking around.

As I reached the top of the steps I heard a terrible noise. “What was that?” It sounded as if it came from the attic. I knew I wasn’t hearing things. Mother had really heard something.

“Dad! Dad!” I said, taking the steps two at a time. “There is something in this house. I heard it in the attic.”

“Oh, no, James, I knew it. Please go check,” mother said, as she stood up from looking under the kitchen table cloth.

“Well, I reckon I’m going to have to get up and show you ladies, there’s nothing around,” dad said, as he got up, wiping his mouth.

I watched dad walk over to the fireplace and take down his old army knife. “Troops, attack,” he shouted, as he laughed huskily. He headed up the stairs, clacking his hush puppies together, like a soldier marching to battle. I could hear dad letting the attic steps down, shouting, “Hup, two, three, four.”

I suddenly realized I hadn’t heard mother say anything.
Where was she? I looked over and she was sitting in a chair in the kitchen, looking up the staircase. I had never seen mother act so strange. She was convinced that there was someone in the house.

“Get out of there, boy,” Dad screamed from upstairs. He was still playing his little game. It was his way of making fun of me and of mother’s keen sense of hearing. Jill, who was still lying on the floor watching Archie, grinned from ear to ear. She knew that dad was up to his tricks.

I decided I’d give dad some of his medicine. I headed up the stairs so I could scare him as he started down.

I turned to see mother totally terrified. She was staring at the top of the staircase. I looked up the steps to see a black boy standing in front of Dad. I had never seen dad look so angry. His face was fire...
engine red and I could see his white knuckles tightly clasping his old army knife. The young boy, who was dressed in an army jacket and jeans, was standing barefoot, trembling. He looked to be about fifteen. (I wondered what he was doing in our house.)

“Amanda, get my gun,” Dad shouted to me. I couldn’t move, and no sound would come out. I had dreamed many times that I couldn’t scream when I had been in danger, and now it was happening.

“Daddy,” Jill screamed, “you can’t kill him.”

“Amanda, I said to get the gun,” Dad said angrily.

I finally realized I was going to have to move. I gradually moved toward the closet. My feet felt like a ton of lead. I went to the closet and got Dad’s hunting rifle. “Oh, please, Lord,” I prayed, “don’t let him kill that boy.” I could still see the boy’s trembling hands, when he came down the steps.

Taking the gun in my hands, I thought about removing the shells, but I knew Dad meant for me to get the gun back to him the way I had found it. With the rifle pointing in the air I slowly moved to the kitchen.

To my surprise I found mother fixing a glass of milk and two bologna sandwiches. Was she losing her mind? Here we were with a strange boy in our house, and dad wants a gun to do who knows what, and mother was fixing herself a sandwich.

I looked over at dad and he was shaking his head in disgust. “Now listen, boy, I want the truth,” dad said, pointing his finger into the boy’s face. The boy just sat there, staring into dad’s eyes, refusing to answer. Dad looked up at me as if to say, You know what to do. “Amanda, take the gun (oh, no, I thought) and watch him, while I go call the police. If this boy don’t want to talk to me, we’ll see if he will talk to the cops.”

“James,” mother said, as she brought the sandwiches into the room, “did you not hear what that child told you, not more than five minutes ago. He was hungry, and that’s why he broke into the house.”

I wondered what I had missed while I had gone after the gun.

“Well, what was he doing upstairs in Amanda’s closet, if he wanted food,” Dad shouted, “the kitchen is downstairs.” He turned abruptly and went into the next room to call the police.
“Ma’im.” Startled, I turned to see the boy staring at mother. “I ain’t lying to ya. I was hungry, and when I heard you I got scared and ran upstairs and hid.”

Suddenly it hit me who the sandwiches and milk were for. The young boy took a bite out of the sandwich, as he listened to mother tell him how she would have helped him if he had just come to the door and asked us.

I was shocked. Mother, out of all of us, was the calmest. There she stood, talking to someone who could possibly have killed us. Dad was angry, Jill was sitting on the floor speechless, but mother was totally together. I should have known mother would help the boy any way she could. She always took the side of the bad guys on T.V. She said she did this because they were alone. No one else would take their side.

While I sat watching mother talk to the young boy I saw him slowly relax. The rigidness of his body and the fright on his face disappeared. I wondered if I would ever have done what mother was doing. The time when I had expected mother to fall apart, she was together.

The boy looked at mother and in a kind voice said, “I’m sorry I broke in, but white people in this neighborhood don’t wanna help black people. I ain’t never done anything like this before, but I got brothers and sisters who need something to eat. I had to get somethin’ to feed them.”

“Listen, you better not believe a word he’s saying,” Dad said, as he came back from the phone. I knew that dad could sense that mother was falling into the hands of the boy. She was believing everything he said.

“James, I think you should just forget the whole thing. I think he’s learned his lesson. You know he’ll get time if he is picked up,” mother said, as she sympathetically looked at the boy.

“I’ve called the police and they’re picking him up,” Dad said, “Now just drop it. You’re not going to change my mind. I don’t fall as easily as you do for a bunch of lies.”

“Mother,” Jill said, in a quivering voice, “just be glad Dad’s not goin’ to kill him.”

“Jill, I wasn’t going to kill anybody, so you better just put a lid on your mouth.”

There was silence in the room. No one wanted to speak for fear of what
“First time!” the fat officer said, laughing. “You mean you told them that, Mo?”

I looked over at the boy, who had his head down. He wasn't going to answer any questions. Mother, who was still by him, was looking down at the floor as if she was ashamed for what Moses had done. “Officers,” she said, “why don't you just leave him alone?”

I was stunned at what mother was saying. He had lied to her, yet she was still taking up for him.

The officers went over to Moses, reading him his rights as they put handcuffs on.

“Maybe this will teach him a lesson,” Dad said, as he watched the officers locking the cuffs.

“Maybe,” the officer said. “Let's go, Moses, I don't want to fool with your report all night.”

As they started out the door I watched the boy as he held his head up. The fear I had seen on his face when he came down the steps was gone. He looked at mother as he walked toward her. The policemen held to his arm, allowing him to lead. His eyes became a pool of tears as mother reached to his handcuffs.
"I don't lie about the food," he said. "My brothers and sisters, they do need food. I have to do what I can to feed 'em. My mama, she's a good person, never complaining about nothin'. She's like you, always willing to help the other person, I don't wanna hurt my mama."

As a tear ran down mother's cheek she raised her arms and embraced him. The boy laid his head on her chest like a young baby needing warmth from his mother.

"Moses, I knew what you had done, and your mama, I'm sure, knows what you've been doing. Your mama knows you're doing it for her. Mamas know a lot more than you think," she said quickly, glancing over at me and Jill.

The boy looked up at mother, realizing what she had just said. Turning to the officers, he cleared his throat and said, "I'm ready to go."

I followed him out the door while the policemen walked on each side of him. As he got into the police car, he turned and looked back at mother standing in the door and he grinned. I then heard him say in a faint whisper, "She knows. She really knows."