

Name: _____

“All the Years of Her Life”

Morley Callaghan

They were closing the drugstore, and Alfred Higgins who had just taken off his white jacket was putting on his coat and getting ready to go home. The little gray-haired man, Sam Carr, who owned the drugstore was bending down behind the cash register, and when Alfred Higgins passed him, he looked up and said softly, “Just a moment, Alfred. One moment before you go.”

The soft, confident, quiet way in which Sam Carr spoke made Alfred start to button his coat nervously. He felt sure his face was white. Sam Carr usually said, “Good night.” brusquely, without looking up. In the six months he had been working in the drugstore Alfred had never heard his employer speak softly like that. His heart began to beat so loud it was hard for him to get his breath. “What is it Mr. Carr?” he asked.

Maybe you’d be good enough to take a few things out of your pocket and leave them here before you go Sam Carr said.

What things’ what are u talking about?”

You’ve got a compact and a lipstick and at least two tubes of toothpaste in your pocket. Alfred.”

What do you mean’ Do you think I’m crazy?” Alfred blustered. His face got red and he knew he looked fierce with indignation. But Sam Carr, standing by the door with his blue eyes shining bright behind his glasses and his lips moving underneath his gray mustache only nodded his head a few times and then Alfred grew very tightened and he didn’t know what to say. Slowly he raised his hand and dipped it into his pocket and with his eyes never meeting Sam Carr’s eyes, he took out a blue compact and two tubes of toothpaste and a lipstick, and he laid them one by one on the counter.

Petty thieving, eh. Alfred? Sam Carr said. 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.”

“So now you think you’ll tell me a lie, eh? What kind of a sap do I look like huh? I don’t know what goes on in my own store, eh? I tell you you’ve been doing this pretty steady.” Sam Carr said as he went over and stood behind the cash register.

Ever since Alfred had left school he had been getting in trouble whenever he worked. He lived at home with his mother and his father, who was a printer. His two older brothers were married and his sister had got married last year, and it would have been all right for his parents now if Alfred had only been able to keep a job.

While Sam Carr smiled and stroked the side of his face very delicately with the tips of his fingers. Alfred began to feel that familiar terror growing in him that had been in him every time he had got into such trouble.

“I liked you. Sam Carr was saying. I liked you and would have trusted you, and now look what I got to do.” While Alfred watched with his alert, frightened blue eyes. Sam Carr drummed with his fingers on the counter. I don’t like to call a cop in point-blank, “he was saying as he looked very worried. “You’re a tool and maybe I should call your father and tell him you’re a fool. Maybe I should let them know I’m going to have you locked up.”

“My father’s not at home. He’s a printer. He works nights,” Alfred said.

“Who’s at home?”

My mother. I guess.

Then we’ll see what she says. Sam Carr went to the phone and dialed the number Alfred was not so ashamed but there was that deep fright growing in him and he blurted out arrogantly like a strong, full-grown man. “Just a minute. You don’t need to tell her.” He wanted to sound like a swaggering, big guy who could look after himself, yet the old childish hope was in him, the longing that someone at home would come and help him. “Yeah, that’s right, he’s in trouble.” Mr. Carr was saying. “Yeah, your boy works for me. You’d better come down in a hurry.” And when he was finished Mr. Carr went over to the door and looked out at the street and watched the people passing in the late summer night. “I’ll keep my eye out for a cop.” Was all he

said.

Alfred knew how his mother would come rushing in; she would rush in with her eyes blazing, or maybe she would be crying, and she would push him away when he tried to talk to her, and make him feel her dreadful contempt yet he longed that she might come before Mr. Carr saw the cop on the beat passing the door.

While they waited- and it seemed a long time- they did not speak, and when at last they heard some one tapping on the closed door. Mr. Carr turning the latch, said crisply.

Come in. Mrs. Higgins, "He looked hard-faced and stern.

Mrs. Higgins must have been going to bed when he telephoned for her hair was tucked in loosely under her hat, and her hand at her throat held her light coat tightly across her chest so her dress would not show. She came in large and plump, with a little smile on her friendly face. Most of the store lights had been turned out and at first she did not see Alfred, who was standing in the shadow at the end of the counter. Yet as soon as she saw him she did not look as Alfred thought she would look, she smiled, her blue eyes never wavered and with a calmness and dignity that made them forget that her clothes seemed to have been thrown on her, she put out her hand to Mr. Carr and said politely, "I'm Mrs. Higgins, I'm Alfred's mother."

Mr. Carr was a little embarrassed by her lack of terror and her simplicity, and he hardly knew what to say to her, so she asked.

"Is Alfred in trouble?"

"He is. He's been taking things from the store. I caught him red-handed. Little things like compacts and toothpaste and lipsticks stuff he can sell easily," the proprietor said.

As she listened Mrs. Higgins looked at Alfred sometimes and nodded her head sadly and when Sam Carr had finished she said gravely, "Is it so, Alfred?"

"Yes."

"Why have you been doing it?"

"I've been spending money. I guess."

“On what?”

Going around with the guys. I guess Alfred said.

Mrs. Higgins put out her hand and touched Sam Carr’s arm with an understanding gentleness, and speaking as though afraid of disturbing him, she said, “If you would only listen to me before doing anything.” Her simple earnestness made her shy; her humility made her falter and look away, but in a moment she was smiling gravely again, and she said with a kind of patient dignity, “What did you intend to do, Mr. Carr?”

“I was going to get a cop. That’s what I ought to do.”

“Yes. I suppose so. It’s not for me to say, because he’s my son. Yet I sometimes think a little good advice is the best thing for a boy when he’s a certain period in his life.” She said.

Alfred couldn’t understand his mother’s quiet composure for if they had been at home and someone had suggested that he was going to be arrested he knew she would be in a rage and would cry out against him. Yet now she was standing there with that gentle pleading smile on her face saying, “I wonder if you don’t think it would be better just to let him come home with me. He looks a big fellow doesn’t he? It takes some of them a long time to get any sense.” And they both stared at Alfred, who shifted away with a bit of light shining for a moment on his thin face and the tiny pimples over his cheekbone.

But even while he was turning away uneasily Alfred was realizing that Mr. Carr had become aware that his mother was really a strong woman, he knew that Sam Carr was puzzled by his mother as if he had expected her to come in and plead with him tearfully, and instead he was being made to feel a bit ashamed by her vast tolerance. While there was only the sound of the mother’s soft assured voice in the store. Mr. Carr began to nod his head encouragingly at her. Without being alarmed, while being just large and still and simple and hopeful, she was becoming dominant there in the lit store. “Of course. I don’t want to be harsh,” Mr. Carr was saying, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll just fire him and let it go at that. How’s that?” and he got up and shook hands with Mrs. Higgins, bowing low to her in deep respect.

There was such warmth and gratitude in way she said, "I'll never forget your kindness," that Mr. Carr began to feel warm and genial himself.

"Sorry we had to meet this way," he said. "But I'm glad I got in touch with you. Just wanted to do the right thing, that's all," he said.

"It's better to meet like this than never isn't it?" she said. Suddenly they clasped hands as if they liked each other, as if they had known each other a long time. Good night, sir." She said.

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

The mother and son walked along the street together, and the mother was taking a long, firm stride as she looked ahead with her stern face full of worry. Alfred was afraid to speak to her, he was afraid of the silence that was between them, so he only looked ahead too, for the excitement and relief was still pretty strong in him, but in a little while, going along like that in silence made him terribly aware of the strength and the sternness in her, he began to wonder what she was thinking of as she stared ahead so grimly, she seemed to have forgotten that he walked beside her, so when they were passing under the Sixth Avenue elevated and the rumble of the train seemed to break the silence, he said in his old blustering way, "Thank God it turned out like that I certainly won't get in a jam like that again."

"Be quiet. Don't speak to me. You've disgraced me again and again." She said bitterly.

"That's the last time. That's all I'm saying"

"Have the decency to be quiet," she snapped. They kept on their way, looking straight ahead.

When they were at home and his mother took off her coat. Alfred saw that she was really only half dressed, and she made his feel afraid again when she said, without even looking at him, "You're bad a lot. God forgive you. It's one thing after another and always has been. Why do you stand there stupidly? Go to bed, why don't you?" When he was going, she said, "I'm going to make myself a cup of tea. Mind, now, not a word about tonight to your father."

While Alfred was undressing in his bedroom he heard his mother moving around the kitchen. She filled the kettle and put it on the stove. She

moved a chair. And as he listened there was no shame in him, just wonder and a kind of admiration of her strength and repose. He could still see Sam Carr nodding his head encouragingly to her; he could hear her talking simply and earnestly, and as he sat on his bed he felt a pride in her strength. "She certainly was smooth," he thought. "Gee, I'd like to tell her she sounded swell."

And at last he got up and went along to the kitchen, and when he was at the door he saw his mother pouring herself a cup of tea. He watched and he didn't move. Her face as she sat there was a frightened broken face utterly unlike the face of the woman who had been so assured a little while ago in the drugstore. When she reached out and lifted the kettle to pour hot water in her cup her hand trembled and the water splashed on the stove. Leaning back in the chair, she sighed and lifted the cup to her lips, and her lips were groping loosely as if they would never reach the cup. She swallowed the hot tea eagerly and then she straightened up in relief, though the hand holding the cup still trembled. She looked very old.

It seemed to Alfred that this way it had been every time he had been in trouble before, that this trembling had really been in her as she hurried out hair dressed to the drugstore. He understood why she had sat alone in the kitchen the night his young sister had kept repeating doggedly that she was getting married. Now he felt all that his mother had been thinking of as they walked along the street together a little while ago. He watched his mother, he never spoke, but at that moment his youth seemed to be over, he knew all the years of her life by the way her hand trembled as she raised the cup to her lips. It seemed to him that this was the first time he had ever looked upon his mother.