

BABY GIRL

Jonah first saw the child—romping through the playground adjacent to the aged cemetery—several months earlier. She never swung on the swings or played on the monkey bars. She was far too small, Jonah guessed two-years-old, perhaps a diminutive three. She usually played around the playground’s wooded fringe, singing and squealing loudly as she ran from tree to tree, then remaining unnervingly quiet while she hid behind them.

She wasn’t there every day, or even every week, but her unguided frolics were frequent enough to cause him concern. The playground was well out of town, and within a minute walking distance to the Snake River just north of it. Every time she appeared he would shake his head at the brazen incompetence of any parent who would allow so young a child to play unsupervised in such a place. Then he would curse himself for not having the guts to do anything about it.

The oddest thing about her appearances though was that she only came when the playground was completely empty. She always played alone.

He was still a stranger in this small, tightly knit community, and in the purest sense it was none of his business anyway, so he never approached the child in the playground.

The first time he spoke to the little girl was the night he found her sitting alone, crying, in his cemetery.

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Jonah usually didn’t work nights, except for Halloween when it was necessary to keep away would-be vandals, and that was just fine with him. Dogwood

Cemetery was a different place at night, so quiet and dark, and utterly removed from anything approaching the world of the living. He knew the local kids partied at the beach not too far away; at least a handful could be found out there on almost any summer night, but that too was a different world, and one whose borders might have been light-years away rather than a quarter mile.

The cemetery was huge in relation to the community it served; Dogwood claimed less than five hundred souls, and as recently as the early seventies the population has been as low as two hundred and fifty. Although the cemetery was also used by the people of Normal Hills, a larger town several miles to the west whose own small cemetery had filled to capacity years before, it was still the largest he'd ever seen in this part of the country. Wandering its old lanes long enough it was no surprise—some of the stones were as old as the west itself.

That night though, Jonah was working. Winter had passed and spring-cleaning had begun in earnest; he had devoted that day to the cleaning of markers and raking of debris from the green. He had worked the day away bagging the rubbish. All he had to do now was collect it. The city's old green International sat idling midway in the center isle, its bed already half full, its headlights providing just enough light to see by as he wandered the rows, hunting down the stuffed bags. His mistake that day he now realized was using black bags. Although larger and thicker than the white, they were near impossible to find in the dark. By ten that evening most of them had been picked up and he was making a final sweep, wandering the rows, scanning them with his flashlight in search of stray bags.

He heard her, crying pitifully in the pitch-blackness to his left, before he saw her.

He knew her instantly. She was the same little girl he had watched play so many times in the nearby park. Scraggly, shoulder-length brown hair, fair-colored skin, almost paper-white, achingly thin beneath her faded blue dress. Her legs from the knees down were bare, and she had only thin canvas shoes to keep her feet warm. She rocked as she cried, hugging herself desperately for warmth. She shivered with the chill, late winter breeze.

Jonah stood only a few feet away from her, his flashlight trained on the small plot where she sat curled up into a ball. He was in a state of almost perfect mental shock. It wasn't until she turned toward him, squinting into the bright shaft of light that he moved. An instant later he was kneeling beside her, shrugging his wool-lined denim jacket off and wrapping it around her tiny shoulders.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" It was a classical, dumb grown-up question and he knew it. Obviously she was not okay—she was alone in the dark, freezing her butt off, and most likely starving as well.

The little girl watched him somewhat fearfully, but to his surprise managed a feeble, "Yea-huh."

"Where are your mom and dad sweetheart . . . what's your name . . . where do you live?" The three questions came out in rapid-fire succession, and in a voice he realized was almost shrill with panic.

One at a time, he scolded himself.

"Where are your mom and dad, sweetheart," he asked in the softest, least threatening voice he could manage.

She wouldn't—or couldn't—answer, only watched him sheepishly as he watched her, her regular sobs giving the dark place a quiet heartbeat. Then she pointed with a tiny outstretched finger toward the highway away from town.

For a moment Jonah saw red, an intense, murderous anger the likes of which he had never known, blurring his vision and thoughts.

They left her, he thought. *Fucking lowlife trash abandoned her here. She could have frozen to death!*

That last thought brought him back to himself. She *was* freezing. Despite the thickness and warmth of the jacket that covered her all the way to her tiny feet, she was still shivering.

"What's your name sweetheart?"

She continued to watch him, more curious and hopeful than fearful now, but did not, or could not, answer.

"Would you like to go somewhere else?" he invited. "Someplace warm, maybe get something to eat?"

Still no answer, but when he held a large weather-worn hand out, she placed her own inside it and rose from

her frosty resting place.

Jonah was not a superstitious man, he never gave much credence to the supernatural, even after years of working in cemeteries. When he noticed the epitaph on the stone where the child had rested though, a bone-deep chill that made the hairs on his arms and neck stand alert dissipated the remaining heat of anger.

It read: *Baby Girl*.

* * *

There were perhaps a dozen graves just like it in the Dogwood Cemetery, the unknown dead buried at county expense because no one could or would claim the bodies. Their markers were, for the most part, little more than afterthoughts, an anticlimax to the mysteries of life and death. Small brass plates anchored to the earth by small brass pegs, and epitaphs that gave nothing more than year of death and the title *Unknown*. These were the forgotten souls, ignored even by the pranksters and vandals who kept Jonah awake and prowling those dark lanes until the early hours his first All Hallows Eve in Dogwood.

Dogwood was a town where the dead outnumbered the living by almost two to one, and the people of Dogwood respected their dead. These nameless corpses weren't their people though, just the recipients of a peculiar kind of welfare. The citizens paid to have them planted, but nothing more. There were no flowers on Memorial Day, and no courtesy visits.

Someone had cared for this nameless child though, enough at least to replace the town's anonymous brass tag with a humble marble stone.

Baby Girl.

* * *

The ride home was surreal—the moon swimming in an overcast sky, the International's uneven headlights bludgeoning through a thick settling fog. His one-sided conversation sounded uncomfortably like the delusional ramblings of a madman. Jonah spoke ceaselessly, more to

comfort himself than her, he suspected. It was the same line of questioning as before—what’s your name, where do you live, where are your mommy and daddy—cushioned with bits of small talk that would have put most children to sleep.

Baby Girl, for that was how he thought of her now, only stared ahead into the fog-shrouded night, her tiny hands stretched out in front of the heating vent. She rubbed them together continuously, as though no amount of hot air could warm them.

When he pulled into his gravel driveway, killed the motor and stepped out, she scooted across the seat without being asked and let him help her down.

Jonah’s home, an old twenty-foot camper trailer, was as humble as everything else in his life, not by necessity, but by choice. There had been only him for the past four years, since his divorce and a settlement that had virtually wiped him out. There was no alimony, but the home, its furnishings and the Firebird were all forfeit. He was left with only a duffel bag of clothes, the camper and an ailing Ford pickup to tow it around. The Ford was dead now, so he used the town’s International to get around. His new job paid well enough for at least a single room apartment, but he was used to the camper and found it perfectly comfortable for his reclusive bachelor’s lifestyle.

That night he found himself fretting over sleeping arrangements. It was eleven in the evening and Dogwood had no local law enforcement he could call on, so until the proper authorities could be contacted the next morning he was responsible for the welfare of that lost and scared little girl. He wasn’t sure of the appropriateness of sharing a room with a little girl, wasn’t even sure if it was *legal*.

You worry too much, his father used to say. Take care of today and tomorrow will handle itself.

Jonah opened the narrow door and lifted Baby Girl past the high metal step, into the camper’s threshold.

“Would you like to watch the TV?” He followed her in, closing the thin door firmly behind him and cranked up the space heater on the counter next to the sink. “I don’t think there are any cartoons this late, but David Letterman’s pretty funny.”

She turned and looked at him, a shy smile brightening her sickly pale face, and nodded. She sprinted the short distance from Jonah's small cubical of a kitchen to the couch at the end of the narrow hall.

He switched the TV on—a small bunny-eared antique sitting atop the clothes dresser—but found nothing but snow and white sound. The local channels, the few stations he could pick up without the benefit of cable, were all dead.

Baby Girl's smile widened, and with a delighted laughter, like the laughter he often heard from her in the park, bounced into the far corner of his old couch to watch the snow.

"You like this?" he asked, returning her smile.

"Yea-huh," she said with a grin.

Leaving her to watch the electric snow, Jonah stepped into the kitchen and prepared a late dinner for them, microwaved burritos and cold soda. He chopped hers into tiny pieces with a fork and decided as an afterthought she might like catsup with it.

Perfect, he thought. Junk food and soda, every kid's dream. This daddy thing isn't so hard.

He carried her plate to the couch and found her curled up asleep.

"Goodnight kid," he whispered, and turned the TV off.

He watched her while he ate, wondering how anyone could so heartlessly abandon a baby, and wondering what would happen to her after he gave her up to the authorities. The thought made him sick with fear for the nameless child. His appetite gone, he threw his half-eaten dinner away and converted his booth style table into a bed.

Before turning the lights out, he covered her with his thickest blanket, and, without realizing, leaned down and kissed her forehead.

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Sometime during the night she woke and joined Jonah in his bed, waking him briefly as she snuggled in. Then they slept again, together.

Together they dreamt.

* * *

It was early morning, the eastern sky glowing, ugly and bruised, as the impotent autumn sun began its ascent.

Jonah knew it was autumn because there was frost on the ground. The morning air had a frigid edge to it, and the groves of willows and dogwoods in the park still held most of their discolored leaves. He watched from his seat at a bench near the swings as an old Plymouth Ventura parked in the gravel near the restroom, and a little girl (Baby Girl) opened her door and ran to it. A young woman and young man climbed out too; the woman, barely more than a girl herself, on the edge of tears, the young man's face red with anger.

Jonah could not make out the words of their shouted conversation, only feelings, emotions: desperation and sadness from the woman and barely controlled rage from the man.

Except for Jonah, sitting unnoticed at the bench in the playground, they were alone. The woman lunged suddenly past the man and toward the restroom. She didn't make it far; he caught her by the arm and brought her back forcefully, slamming her into the car. She cried out in pain, struggling to break free.

The man balled up a fist and shouted as he brought it down once, a second time, and a third. The struggle ended and she lay unmoving on the hood. He put her in the back seat and climbed in the front, starting the car.

Baby Girl came back before he could pull out.

He smiled at her, a crocodile smile full of spite and trickery, and pointed to the playground.

Mom's taking a nap, go play for a while.

Baby Girl ran to the playground with a shout of joy, and when she wasn't looking, the angry man—her father—drove away.

When she saw they were gone she simply waited like a good girl. She knew to stay put when she was lost so she'd be easier to find. She knew they would come back.

When they didn't she started crying, but she still waited.

She was found a week later, frozen to death beneath the grove of dogwoods where she sat, still waiting.

* * *

Jonah woke the next morning alone.

He showered, dressed, and drove to work without thinking. Numb.

Numb.

That day, and every day after, there were flowers on Baby Girl's grave.

* * *

A few months later he saw her again, playing alone in the park. After her game of hide and seek in the dogwoods she stopped and paused by the swing set. Jonah watched as she laboriously hoisted herself into one of the high swings, and because she was too small to make it go on her own, she just sat there.

When she saw Jonah, leaving the cemetery, walking toward her on a path through the bordering groves, she did not vanish as he feared. She smiled, waved, and waited to be pushed.

* * *

He brought Baby Girl home with him that night; gave her a warm couch to sleep on, a TV full of electric snow and white noise to watch, a warm body to snuggle into when she grew sleepy.

As the years passed Jonah grew older, but she did not. On the days Baby Girl came, he always made the time to play with her. He always made her a comfortable bed on the couch, a hot meal he knew she wouldn't eat, and when the next day arrived she was always gone again.

She didn't talk much, but when she did she called him daddy, and although he knew it wasn't her real name, Jonah always called her Baby Girl.