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This novel excerpt introduces the reader to characters who find themselves in unusual circumstances, trying to make sense of a world they no longer understand. They are struggling to find peace, not only with themselves, but with the people they love.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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PROLOGUE

August, 1971

Mortimer Temple did not believe in magic; he did, however, strongly believe in illusions. But he also knew that many people *do* believe in magic and he'd staked his name and reputation on their willingness to pay to see it: TEMPLE'S Traveling Spectacle of MAGIC & ODDITIES, the hand-painted banner at the road proclaimed. This slogan was also painted in red and gold letters on the side of his trailer. It was sweltering in the trailer and he palmed sweat from his forehead and neck as he dug through his trunk, trying to find his cleanest black jacket. The first show of the night would start in a little over an hour and he wanted something to eat before it began. He thought that the crowd would be better tonight than last night; on the first of the month people had more money to spend and today was the first of August. If there was one thing Mort had learned, it was that a man who was broke was ill inclined to believe in magic, but a man with a pocket full of folding cash? That man could believe in almost anything.

He heard Ambrose climbing the steps to his trailer and called out to him as the door opened. "Is everything ready?"

"Yeah, boss, but..." Ambrose looked nervous, which was an unseemly look for a man of his size: at six-foot-four and nearly three-hundred pounds, "nervous" did not sit well on his heavily muscled frame. His voice was deep and dark as a mug of molten chocolate.

“Yeah, but what?” Mort snapped. He was never in a good mood when he was hungry.

“It’s the gypsies again,” Ambrose said.

Mort laughed. “The Roma?” He buttoned his jacket and popped his cuffs with a flourish. “No worries, princess. I’ll handle it. Just make sure Donnie has the geeks prepped.” The geeks, three brothers from Louisiana, were feral and usually very dirty. Donnie would hose them down and make sure they were wearing their collars and loincloths before the gates opened.

Mort ran his hands through his thinning, graying hair. The sweat mixed with his pomade and his hair slicked back nicely. “Are they camped to the east or west?”

“East. You’ll hear them as soon as you reach the road.” Ambrose stepped out of the trailer and Mort strode past him, dust swirling around the soles of his shoes. It was dry here, near the road, but a mile to the south was the start of the Florida Everglades. For the last two nights, Mort had occasionally heard the mating cry of a bull alligator. Now, nearer, he could hear guitars, drums, cymbals, and a violin. He headed toward the music.

This was not the first time this had happened. Bands of Roma often found carnivals and planked their wagons nearby, hoping to lure in some of the people that the carnival would attract. Hyenas, Mort thought. Trying to prey on *my* marks. Taking money from *my* pocket. I think not.

He’d dealt with the Roma before. He would go and ask them nicely if they would like to work in his employ while the carnival was here. They would say no. Then he would ask them nicely to leave. They would speak Romanian or Russian, or some other

such thing and act as if they could no longer understand him. Then he would wait. He would give them until the end of the night to pull stakes. If they didn't, they might find that their chickens and slat-thin goats and mongrel dogs would all be gone come morning. They would find that something had eaten every one of them in the night, leaving only scraps of flesh and fur and feathers behind.

The geeks were *always* hungry.

Mort smiled gently and sang under his breath as he approached the gypsy camp. "Oh, the merry-go-round broke down... as we went 'round and 'round..."

The sun was sinking fast and the last of the light was bleeding out of the day. The musicians were gathered around a small fire. Three women danced nearby, tambourines tapping in time against their ample hips, their long dark hair swaying with their nimble steps.

"Who's in charge here, please?" Mort called out to them. A young man with a guitar gestured with his chin to the trailer to his left. Mort nodded his thanks and was about to knock on the door when it opened. A young woman stood before him, her dark eyes large and luminous in the light of the campfire.

"You are the magic man, yes?" She smiled, showing a tiny crescent of the whitest teeth Mort had ever seen. Her hair was as dark as her eyes, hung in a careless braid over one shoulder. If he had ever seen a more beautiful woman, he couldn't remember when. "You come to see my father to ask us to leave?"

"I..." All of the carefully prepared things he had to say fled from his mind like a herd of startled horses. He could only stand there and stare at her face. Her face was...

“Magic, yes?” she said again. She gave him a knowing wink. “You do magic? I show you *good* magic.” She took his hand and led him to the campfire and gestured for him to sit.

“I..” He thought of the show. He had to get back. “I wanted to come welcome you and to offer you an invitation to tonight’s show.” He held his open hand to her, curled it into a fist, opened it and two tickets lay on his palm. ADMIT ONE, printed in black ink on red paper with scalloped edges.

She laughed and took the tickets and tucked them into the waistband of her long skirt. “Good trick,” she said. “Now I show you a trick,” She walked to a man near the fire and muttered some quick words with him in Russian. He spoke back rapidly, looking concerned. Then he shrugged and handed her the bowl in his hands.

“You’re hungry, no? You like stew?” She handed Mort the spoon from the bowl of stew then dumped what was left in the bowl on the ground. Then she handed him the bowl.

It was full almost to the rim with hot stew. It smelled amazing. Chunks of vegetables and meat glistened in the thick broth.

“How did you do that?” he asked. He had seen many magicians but this girl had, with no artifice whatsoever, just performed a feat that was more impressive than even the best of them. Simply refilled the bowl, yes, but how?

“Good magician never reveals trick,” she said. “Hurry. Eat. I will come to your show.”

Mort ate quickly. The stew tasted as good as it smelled. When he was almost full he noticed something odd. There appeared to be as much stew in the bowl as there had been when he'd started. Before he could comment, she plucked the bowl from his hands.

"You hurry, now," she said. Her voice followed him as he walked from the camp. "I will see you soon, magic man."

Mort hiked back to the carnival, and singing softly to himself as the moon rose above the tree line. So what if the Roma lured a few of his customers to their campsite? He would learn the trick of the Roma woman's never-ending stew. And if she would not teach it to him? Maybe she could be persuaded to come with the carnival. He was always on the look-out for new talent.

He stood on the stage and looked out over the sea of faces- mostly townies but there were many he knew must be freshly scrubbed farm-hands as well. He scanned the crowd and there she was, third row back to his right. She saw him looking and smiled. A shriveled looking old man sat beside her, home rolled cigarette between his finger and thumb.

About five minutes into his routine, Mort noticed that Lana, his assistant, was not at the side of the stage. She usually waited there in the wings until he unveiled her for the finale of the show. He amused the audience by pulling a rabbit, a chicken, and a cat out of his hat then acting as if they'd gotten loose by accident. He chased the chicken around

the stage for a minute and the audience laughed aloud. Everyone loves a clown. The chicken ran up the aisles and many children jumped from their seats to chase it.

“For my next feat,” Mort said, “I will require a volunteer from the audience.” Hands shot up like a sea of corn ready for harvest. Mort looked for the Roma woman, but she was already on her feet, striding toward the stage. Behind him, Ambrose had rolled out the Box.

Many magicians used some variation of this trick. You placed a woman (preferably a rather petite one) in the box- which was, in reality, two boxes. What the audience did not see was that there was another woman inside the box before the volunteer even came to the stage, concealed in the rolling cart under the second box beneath its false bottom. You gave your volunteer a handkerchief to hold. You then told her to lie down in the box. When she got in, her head stuck out of a hole cut in the first box. Then her arm poked out of a hole cut in the second box, holding the handkerchief. What the audience didn't see was that as soon as the lid closed, the second woman opened the false bottom and pushed the volunteer's body up into the first box, slid shut the sliding box sides, then put her arm through the hole in the second box holding an identical handkerchief that she'd been given before the show. You spun the box around, ostensibly to show the audience the back of the box, but really to give the girl underneath time to get into position. When the box was back in its original place, the audience saw what appeared to be one woman, head smiling from the first box, hand waving the handkerchief from the second.

Then, with a great flourish of serrated saws, you cut her in half.

The Roma climbed to the stage to applause and more than a few whistles and cat-calls. She grasped the hand that Mort offered her and spun like a dancer, making her long skirt bell out and the bells sewn on its hem jingled cheerily.

Mort's heart sprinted at the touch of her hand.

"What is your name, young lady?" he asked.

"Stela," she replied. "Are you going to turn me into a rabbit?"

The audience laughed and cheered. She's a natural, Mort thought.

"Something better than that," he said. He reached in his pocket for his handkerchief. He bent at the waist and presented it to her and she took it with a curtsy. Then he led her to the box and she climbed inside. He closed the lid with a bang. He spun the box round. Stela turned her head and smiled at the audience. The hand was waving the red handkerchief like a flag.

He then reached behind the curtain and pulled out a saw. Long and silver, it flashed in the stage lights. He bent it back and forth and asked a man in bib overalls to come up to the stage to attest that it was indeed a sharpened saw. The man came up and held it, examined it and hollered out to the crowd that it was real.

The rest of the show went exactly as usual. He sawed the box in half, pulled the halves apart and walked between them- Stela's head smiling from one box, the hand with the handkerchief still waving from the other- then put them back together, opened the lid, and pulled Stela from the box- whole and unharmed. The audience loved it, as always.

As they cheered, Mort bent at the waist and kissed her hand.

“You come see me tomorrow, magic man,” she said, then disappeared into the flow of people leaving the tent.

He wheeled the box backstage and looked for his assistant but she wasn't there. When the box stopped moving, the lid sprang open and Edith, the woman concealed under the second box, climbed out.

“I'm so sorry, boss,” she said.

“Where's Lana?” he asked.

“Lana got sick. Bad sick, throwing up sick, about five minutes before the show,” she said. “I hope I didn't ruin the act. I swear it wasn't my fault.” She reached in the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She tapped one out and stuck it in the corner of her lipsticked mouth.

“What are you talking about?” Mort was distracted, thinking of Stela's dark skin and darker eyes.

“The false bottom wouldn't open. I tried and tried, but it was stuck fast.” She struck a match to her cigarette. “I'm just glad the girl you picked had the sense to move into the first box. I hope the audience didn't notice there wasn't a hand sticking out of the hole.”

Mort lay awake for a long time that night, thinking about the hand sticking out of the box, thinking that there were tricks, and then there were *good* tricks. He had a hunch that Stela had many more good tricks. He wanted to know them all. He thought that maybe it was time to hire a new assistant.

CHAPTER I

August, 2001

Once upon a time there was a little girl who was seldom very bad and mostly did as she was told. She had no sisters or brothers but was not afflicted with the attitude of many only children who grow wild and unruly, spoiled and vain, under the unfiltered light of their parents' love. Anna was five years old.

She liked singing songs by the Beatles, especially "Hey Jude." She was very sad when her mother had told her that the singer had died a long time ago.

She liked her neighbor's cat, ChowChow, but had never had a pet of her own. She really wanted a dog, but her mother was afraid of dogs. She hated lima beans and brussels sprouts and if she'd had a dog she would have fed them to him under the table.

Anna woke one morning and found that her stuffed tiger had come to life.

Felix was a gift from her father, all tawny-orange and black and white. When she had unwrapped her gift, her father— ever the biologist— had softly said, "*Felis tigris*. Do you like tigers, baby?"

"Felix what?" she'd asked, and just like that the name had stuck.

Felix was cute and soft and usually very compliant with her admonitions to play in this way or that way. Eat your lunch, she would tell him, and he'd sit quiet and agreeable as she held her sandwich to his muzzle and put her juice-box to his pink felt-fabric tongue. But this morning he batted at her nose. He crawled under the covers,

rubbed against her face with his synthetic fur, still smelling vaguely of the peanut butter sandwich she'd attempted to feed him a few days before.

She was delighted. She played with him all morning and when her mother called her down to breakfast, she couldn't wait to tell her about Felix. She tried to take him with her but he squirmed out of her arms and burrowed under the blankets.

As she told her mother about her morning with the tiger, her mother nodded and smiled. "That's nice, honey," she said.

"Mommy, come *see*," Anna pleaded, but her mother was busy doing laundry.

"Later, honey," she said, and went back to folding clothes.

Anna went back to her room and Felix was nowhere to be seen. She looked under the blanket, in her toy box where other animals lay piled in a careless tumble. As she was crossing the room to look in the closet, a small orange blur streaked out from beneath the bed. She reached for the tiger, ready to play, but the tiger only batted at her ankle and ran beneath the bed once more.

A moment later Anna felt a thin line of searing heat on her ankle. There was a tiny, razor-thin cut where the tiger had swatted at her. A drop of blood slid down to stain the cuff of her short pink sock.

She went downstairs and showed her mother.

"How did you hurt yourself?" Her mother picked her up and sat her on the edge of the bathroom counter and put ointment, a Band-Aid, and a kiss on her cut.

"Felix did it," the girl said.

“Anna Marie,” her mother began, and the girl knew that when both of her names were used, whatever followed would not be good. “What have your father and I told you about telling stories?”

Anna knew that “telling stories” meant “telling lies” and that lying would get her in trouble, but why was she getting in trouble for telling the truth?

So rather than suffer the consequences of the truth, the little girl told her mother a story about a toy car with a sharp edge. Her mother gave her a glass of milk and a cheese sandwich and told her to go play until her father got home.

When she heard her father's station wagon pull in the driveway she ran downstairs to meet him. He picked her up and rubbed his chin against her cheek until she giggled and kicked her legs in protest. “It’s *tickly*, Daddy.” She tried to pull him upstairs to her room but he said he needed to talk to Mommy first. She heard them kissing as she ran up the stairs to wait for him.

She was hopping impatiently from one foot to the other when he came in.

What’s so important that you need to show me? Her father smiled down at her.

She pulled him by the hand to her bed. Felix had apparently climbed back up and had made a den of her quilt. She peeked under the blanket. The tiger's eyes, once button-black, were now a greenish-gold and seemed to glow in the light that seeped through the covers.

“What have you got under there?” Her father lifted the blanket and the tiger darted out and climbed the pile of pillows at the head of the bed, then turned in a circle, tail waving slowly.

Anna reached for the tiger, picked him up and hugged him tight, tight. His fur was softer now, like the fur of the neighbor's cat.

"Isn't it neat, Daddy?"

Her father walked stiff-legged to the door and closed it. He came back to her and reached for the tiger.

"How did this happen?" he asked. His face was pinched with worry. "Has your mother seen this?" Then the tiger twisted in his grip and he hissed in pain. A poppy of blood bloomed on his shirt sleeve.

"I don't think he had claws when I woke up," she said, "but he's sure got them now." She showed her father the Band-Aid on her ankle. Normally he would ooh and ahh over her boo-boos, but now he scowled.

"Has your mother seen this?" he asked again.

"I tried to show her but she wouldn't come see."

Her father pulled a pillowcase from one of the pillows at the head of the bed. He held the tiger at arm's length by the scruff of its neck with his other hand. Once the pillowcase was free, he thrust the struggling tiger inside. He gathered the opening tight in both hands and the bag thrashed and twisted in his grasp.

"Anna, honey—"her father placed one palm under her chin and tilted her face up to look into her eyes. He only did that when he wanted to say something very serious, like "we're moving," or "I love you," or "Grandma's gone to heaven."

She listened carefully, eyes wide.

"--don't tell Mommy. Let this be our secret. Okay?"

Secrets were bad, too. Almost as bad as telling lies. This day had started so well and become so strange and confusing. But she said, “Okay, Daddy. Our secret.”

He let go of her chin and headed to the door.

“Where are you taking Felix?”

Her father paused, one hand on the doorknob. “Tigers are wild animals, so he will need to go to the zoo.”

Anna pouted, but not much. She hadn’t liked being scratched. Scratchy tigers were no fun to sleep with. Felix clearly did not play well with others.

“Can we go see him at the zoo?” She asked.

“Absolutely,” her father said, then took Felix away.

She heard him yell to her mother: I forgot something at the office, honey. I’ll be right back. Then the front door slammed and the station wagon started and he drove away.

She looked around at the rest of her toys. Nothing seemed like much fun. At bedtime that night when her father tucked her in he had a thick bandage on one hand. He asked if she wanted her bunny or her bear to sleep with. She shook her head. She had put all of her animals in the toy box and closed the lid tight. He nodded and smoothed the covers up to her chin.

“Blow out the light, baby.” He stood by the door and when she blew a kiss at the light he flicked off the switch. “Say your prayers. Sleep tight.”

She prayed for Mommy and Daddy and Aunt Liv and Granddad. She prayed for all of the hungry kids in the world who didn't have her lima beans to eat. She prayed that Felix would be happy at the zoo.

Her father's words followed her down into her dreams-- let this be our secret, okay Anna? Our secret...

Finding that her tiger had come to life was one thing; stuffed tigers are cute. But when she woke to find one of her pillows inching sluggishly across the floor a week later, it was not cute at all. She nudged it with her foot. It stopped moving.

She kicked the pillow into her closet and closed the door. She left it there all day. When her father came home she showed it to him. He looked at it for a long time. Then he looked at her.

"You didn't tell Mommy."

She shook her head.

He reached into the closet and picked up the pillow, his mouth squinched up like he'd licked a lemon. He held it by one corner as if it was something dirty. Or dangerous.

"Why is the pillow alive, Daddy? Is the house haunted? Is it a ghost?"

Her father pulled off his glasses with his free hand and rubbed his eyes. He shook his head. "I don't think so, baby. I've seen something like this before. I don't think you need to be afraid."

CHAPTER II

Ed Caldwell drove to the high school where he worked as a biology teacher. The pillow rode on the seat beside him. He'd put his briefcase on top of it and strapped it down with the seatbelt for good measure.

He'd told Anna not to worry, that he'd seen something like this before, but that wasn't exactly the truth. *He* hadn't seen it. His wife had.

When they'd been married he'd known almost nothing about Diane's family. She'd said there was really nothing to know. Her parents had died when she was young, she and her sister had been raised by their grandmother, and her sister lived in North Carolina and that they weren't on speaking terms.

Shortly after they discovered that she was pregnant with Anna, Diane burst into tears one night and told him that she was afraid to have a baby.

"What if there's something wrong with it?" she cried. "It'll be my fault."

Ed, blindsided by his wife's sudden outburst, had put his arms around her and tried to calm her but she just cried harder.

"Nothing's going to be wrong, honey." He stroked her hair as she sobbed against his shoulder. "The baby will be fine."

"You don't know that," she said.

"Why would you think something would be wrong with the baby?" he asked.

"You're doing everything right. Exercising, eating healthy, taking your vita-

“What if it runs in the family?” she whispered. “What if what happened to my sister happens to our baby?”

“What happened to your sister?” he asked. Here it comes, he thought. Finally, after three years together, he was going to hear why they didn’t speak anymore. He wondered if it was an addiction- alcoholism, maybe- and mentally prepared to reassure his wife that while scientists thought that addictive disorders might be hereditary, there was no need to worry over such a thing. Loving parents and a healthy home environment would go a long way to instilling good values that would-

“She’s some kind of a witch.” she said.

“A what?” Nothing Ed could have thought of would have prepared him to respond to this.

“A witch,” she said again, then spent the rest of the night relating the story of Olivia. It was an utterly unbelievable tale. He’d listened, and nodded in the right places, and asked questions here and there. What mattered what not if the story was true, but that his wife believed it to be the truth.

She’d never mentioned it again after that night and he’d never brought it up. Six months later Anna was born and everything had been just fine. As he’d promised.

Until the tiger.

Once he’d had time to overcome his initial shock at what he was seeing, had time to think about all of the possible rational explanations for what appeared to be the animation of a stuffed animal, he’d understood that there was no rational explanation.

Occam's Razor states that a simple explanation is better than a more complex one. In example, if you leave a plate of cookies and a small child in a room together then come back and find the cookies are gone, do you begin by assuming that someone else came in the room and took the cookies? Do you look out the window to see if a dog is running away with a cookie in its mouth? Do you begin by wondering if the cookies just disintegrated, then blew away in a puff of altered atomic energy?

Of course not. You start by looking for crumbs on the child's shirt.

The easy explanation here was not one he cared to consider.

Ed parked behind the school and picked up the pillow. He tucked it under one arm, hating the way it felt as it squirmed against him, trying to get free. He would take it into the lab, and dissect it, the same way he had dissected the tiger. If previous experience was any indicator of future result (and as a scientist he knew this was usually true) then once he'd cut the pillow open it would thrash and writhe for a little while. Then it would be still. He would look inside of it and find nothing that one would not expect to find in a pillow. There had been nothing inside the tiger but cotton fluff and by the time it was still there was no evidence that it had ever had claws, other than the bleeding scratches it had left all over his hand when he'd first pulled it from the pillowcase.

Then he would clean up, and feel ridiculous for cutting open what was now just a normal pillow with a long slit up the center. Then he would think long into the night about the story his wife had told him about her sister, Olivia. And it would not seem quite so unbelievable anymore. And he would worry about his wife, certainly, but even more so, he would worry for his daughter.

CHAPTER III

Anna got up after bed-time to go to the bathroom and heard her parents talking in their bedroom.

“I don't want to talk about it,” her mother said.

“Well, just answer this one question,” her father said. “How old was she when it started?”

“I was about 12, so I guess Olivia would have been about 7. It doesn't matter now. Why are we even talking about this?”

“I read an article today about telekinesis and thought of her and just wondered if-”

“I don't want to talk about it,” her mother said again, in a tone that made it clear that the conversation was over. Anna hurried to the bathroom and peed, but didn't want to flush. She didn't want her parents to know that she'd heard them talking. Like secrets and lies, eavesdropping was not a nice thing to do.

That weekend, after her mother had left for yoga class, her father had suggested that they make cookies. Sugar cookies were Anna's favorite. He measured out the ingredients and she plunged her hands into the mix and kneaded and squished the butter and sugar and vanilla and relished how good they felt smooshing between her fingers. Normally the butter made the dough feel *cold*; today it was strangely warm. Her hands tingled, but not in a way that was unpleasant.

“It tingles, Daddy.”

“What does?” He was watching her as she kneaded the dough. “Do you feel okay?” he asked.

“I feel good,” she said. She laughed, her cheeks flush with high color, a little breathless.

Her father rolled out the dough and let her stamp shapes and sprinkle sugar. Little men with red sugar smiles, stars and hearts and Christmas trees (even though it was only October).

One of the men raised a pale golden arm from the greased cookie sheet and Anna squealed with pleasure.

“Daddy, look!” The little man was struggling to sit up and the tree next to him was curling up at the edges, tentatively feeling the air with its branches.

Her father sighed. “That's what I thought,” he said.

“Does that mean they're done?”

“Oh, they're done, alright,” he said. He scooped all of the dough into his hands and wadded it into a ball which he threw in the sink. He ran hot water over it until it had all dissolved and washed down the drain. Anna started to cry.

“The cookies taste funny when they move,” he said. “It's okay, Anna. Let's go get ice cream, instead.” He took her to the mall and they each got a double scoop at the Baskin-Robbins— chocolate and Rocky Road for him, vanilla and mint-chocolate-chip for her. As she licked the ice cream that melted down her cone and ran in a rivulet down the side of her hand, she asked if the cookies were a secret, too.

He said that her mother would be very upset if she knew about Felix or the pillow or the cookies. “Remember how upset Mommy was when you asked her about Aunt Liv?”

She remembered. Last Christmas a card had come in the mail from Aunt Liv. When she gave it to her mother, her mother had torn the card in half—unopened—and thrown it in the trash. Then her mother had done something that had frightened her badly; her mother—usually so calm and cheerful— had started to cry.

“Don't you ever talk about her,” she had said. “*Ever.*”

Now the little girl nodded solemnly.

Her father said, “That's just how Mommy would feel about this stuff, Anna. Because it's... it's like magic.” He used a napkin to wipe a drip of vanilla ice cream from the front of her yellow t-shirt. “Mommy doesn't believe in magic. If she sees that it's real it will scare her. Remember how I told you that monsters aren't real?”

Anna nodded. “If I found out now that monsters *are* real, I'd be scared of them again, right?”

“Exactly. So we can't tell her. We don't want her to be afraid, do we?”

“Did Aunt Liv try to tell Mommy that magic was real?”

Her father looked surprised, and laughed out loud, his mouth full of sugar cone.

“You don't miss a trick, do you?” He grinned. “Something like that, honey, yes. But just remember, don't-”

“I know,” said the little girl. “Don't tell Mommy.”

When they finished their ice cream he took her to the toy store in the mall. He told her he'd get her any toy she liked, under \$25. She picked out a Snoopy SnoCone maker. When the cashier rang it up, she saw that her father had put something else on the counter.

It was Play-Doh. Four cans of Play-Doh with different colored lids.

“What’s that for, Daddy?”

“It’s for you. When we get home, I want you to make something for me.”

Anna had never used Play-Doh, but she sensed that this was important and (like most little girls) she wanted to make her father happy. So when they got home, they went to her room and she made something for him.

He watched in silence as she pushed and squeezed and molded the colored dough. Her hands began to tingle again, like they had when she'd made the cookies, but now the feeling was stronger. It felt like warm water running through her arms and hands, and when it reached her fingertips it felt like... She tried to think of a way to describe the sensation.

Like when you have to pee—really bad!—for a really long time and finally get to go. That was close, but not quite right.

Like when you're hungry for one thing and you finally get to eat it. That wasn't quite right either.

Like when you have to sneeze and then it finally passes the point where you can stop it.

That was closest of all. After a point, it felt too good to stop. There was an excitement in the pit of her stomach, so pleasant it was almost painful. Last Christmas Eve, when she'd gone to bed, she had been so excited she couldn't sleep; the feeling in her stomach then had been something like this.

This feeling was *better*.

When she was done, four brightly colored animals sat on her dresser. A red shark. A green elephant. A blue Triceratops. A yellow snake. Each was small enough to sit in the palm of her father's hand, except for the snake, which was long and thin. He looked at the snake with the same look he'd given the pillow, then picked it up and smooshed it back into the container with the yellow lid.

"I think three is enough," he said. Anna wanted to make more, but he shook his head. "Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Leave these ones there for now, okay?"

The next morning she sat up in bed and looked at her dresser. All of the animals were gone.

The shark was the easiest to find. It was on the floor in front of the dresser, flopping wildly. The elephant had sought refuge in among the shoes in her closet. One of its legs was a little misshapen and she realized it must have squashed it when it fell off the dresser.

The triceratops was harder to find. She eventually found it under the bed, butting its horn against the wall in the far corner. There was a blue streak of Play-Doh there that would never come off, even when she scrubbed it later. She gathered up all three and put

them back on the dresser and when her father came in a few minutes later the shark had flopped to the floor again and the elephant and the triceratops were running into one another.

Her father picked up the green elephant. It squirmed in his hand, looped its trunk around his thumb. He squashed it in his fist. It squealed. He kneaded it in both hands and at first the dough bulged and bubbled and quivered but after just a few minutes the movement stopped. It was just Play-Doh again.

He did the same thing with the shark and the triceratops then put the green and blue dough back in their containers. He handed the red dough to the little girl.

“Can you make another one, Anna?”

CHAPTER IV

In the small town of Boone's Glen, North Carolina, Olivia Myers- known as Liv by her close friends- stared in awe at the painting on her easel. She never knew when she began a painting what that painting would show at the end. It didn't bother her much these days though it used to frustrate her when she was younger. The older she got, the more she believed that this was probably the only way that real art could be made.

She put her brushes down and wiped her paint-spattered hands absently on the rag tucked into her back pocket. She wanted to go to the kitchen and get her iced tea but she didn't want to miss what might come next.

The painting showed a young girl with brown hair standing next to a tall, brown-haired man. The man was wearing glasses. They were obviously in the little girl's bedroom. It was decorated with pink and purple drapes. As Liv watched the paint crept across the canvas and now the man raised his hand to push his glasses up his nose. Now his mouth moved and though Liv could not hear him she could see his lips move. It looked like he said "and you make another one and a...?" The expression on his face told her it had to be a question. The point of view in the painting was such that she could only see the back of the girl's head, but now the girl nodded. Whatever he'd asked of her, that was a big 10-4. Affirmative. The man handed her a lump of red... was that Play-Doh? Liv saw the familiar blue and yellow containers on the dresser and saw that it was, indeed.

She'd been watching her newest painting for almost ten minutes now, ever since it was finished, so she knew that the paint would probably stop moving soon. She'd once had a painting move for almost a month, but that was the exception. The rule seemed to be more like fifteen to seventeen minutes. She'd timed the phenomenon enough times to know. When it stopped she'd go get her tea.

But she couldn't stop watching, yet. There was a voyeuristic thrill in watching the paintings, in knowing that what she was seeing was happening right now, but that wasn't the only thing that held her transfixed and so thirsty she could barely swallow. Liv knew that the girl in the picture was her niece, though they'd never met. Why wouldn't she? She'd been painting her since before she'd been born. She'd been confused one day almost six years before when the painting that formed under her brush was an image of a fetus. She had painted it to completion then watched, fascinated as the unborn child's tiny fingers had twitched and curled up to its unformed face. She'd been delighted a few months later when she painted her sister giving birth to that child. Her niece. Anna.

Liv had always been happy to see a painting of Anna come to life on the canvas. It had always given her a sense of closeness to a part of her family she didn't know. Anna had her grandmother's strong mouth, and Liv sometimes wondered if Diana had ever told her so. She'd watched Anna learn to walk, watched her open birthday and Christmas presents. But today there was another reason Liv couldn't look away. Lately little Anna had been doing the most *interesting* things. It seemed Anna had a talent of her own.

There were paintings leaned against the wall here in the sunroom. A whole series that she'd painted over the course of the last few weeks. Many of them showed Anna. In

the first, Anna was holding a stuffed tiger. She was wearing pajamas. In the next she was peering under her bed. A casual observer might not notice the thin red scratch on her ankle but Liv couldn't forget it. She'd watched it happen, there on the canvas. Another painting showed Anna and her father making cookies. There were a few more but these were her favorites. Liv couldn't remember what artist had said that paintings are never done- they just stop in interesting places. These certainly had.

Liv leaned in close to the painting, trying with no luck to see what the girl was making with the red dough. Then the paint stopped moving. Show over, she thought. Then with a complete lack of surprise- Anna's a sculptor. It's only a matter of time until she gets her hands on the right materials. Her own ability had started with nothing more than a box of Crayolas and a pad of lined paper. She couldn't remember exactly how old she'd been when the first time had happened- maybe around second grade?- but she remembered exactly what she had drawn.

It had been raining outside and their mother had told her and Diana to go play in their bedroom. Diana wanted to play Barbies but Olivia didn't like dolls. They gave her the creeps; she made her sister put them all away at bedtime. If she didn't she'd have nightmares about them crawling to her bed and climbing on her while she slept. Diana pouted for a few minutes then went downstairs to watch tv with their mother. Liv laid on the floor on her stomach, propped up on her elbows, feet waving in their dirty white sneakers. She dragged the box of crayons out from under the bed and picked out a cerulean blue crayon and doodled for a while, just loops and spirals and scratches and then her mind went away and she started to draw.

She could see no image in her mind. She had no idea what she was drawing; she could barely see the crayon in her hand. Her whole world swam out of focus; everything was a colorful blur highlighted here and there with bright rays of light.

She came back to herself slowly, like swimming to the surface from deep underwater, and the drawing was almost complete.

It showed her father, walking to his car with his arms full of roses. Blue roses, she'd thought. But I'll bet that's not what color they really are. Then the drawing had started to move.

The lines crawled over the page as smoothly as the animated movie her mother had taken them to see at the theater the Saturday before. She watched her father get in his car. She watched him drive home. When the drawn father pulled up to the house, she heard her real father pull in the driveway. Her drawn father walked to the front door, opened it. The door opened downstairs. Then the drawing stopped moving. She stared at it a little while longer, willing it to move again, but nothing happened.

Diana burst in the room to tell her that they were going out to eat because Dad got promoted. Liv crumpled the drawing and stuffed it in her pocket.

She walked into the kitchen and saw her father and mother embracing. The roses were on the kitchen table. They were pink.

Now it appeared that there was another artist in the family. Liv suddenly felt sorry for Anna. She didn't think Diana knew yet what her daughter was doing. She was going to have a fit when she found out.

She considered calling and trying to talk to her sister, again. Every time she'd tried, Diana had hung up on her. Once she'd even changed their number. Since she'd looked up their new number she'd blocked her own when she called and didn't say anything when anyone answered, though she'd been tempted to speak once when Ed had answered. He sounded like a nice enough guy.

The phone rang then, shaking her from her thoughts. She turned away from the painting with reluctance- the urge to wish it to do more, move more, had never stopped- and ran to the kitchen table for her phone.

It was her agent. She'd sold three more paintings. Two at asking price, one above at auction. Would the next lot be ready by the 15th? Sure enough. Check's in the direct deposit. Talk to you next week, Sal.

She dropped her phone and went to the fridge for her long-awaited iced tea. She poured on glass and guzzled it as she stood in the open door of the fridge then filled the glass again before putting the pitcher back on the shelf. Sweet and lemony, just the way she liked it.

She went back to the studio and took the new painting off the easel and set it with the others in the "Anna Series." Lately she seemed to be going through an Anna Period much as Van Gogh had gone through his Blue Period.

Liv hit play on her iPod and grooved for a moment as Lana DelRay's smoky voice came through her Bose speakers. Then she picked up a new canvas and put it on the easel. As she squeezed paint onto her palette she hoped that the next painting would be another Anna painting and not one of the others. Lately she'd been painting some freaky

people- some of them quite literally freaks. In the past her paintings had all been of people she knew or people she would eventually meet. She couldn't imagine the circumstances that would ever lead her to meeting some of the people she was painting now. Maybe I'll join the circus someday, she thought.

Lined against the wall across from the Anna paintings were what she'd come to think of as the Freaks and Geeks paintings:

A gigantic woman, nude, covered head to toe in dense hair standing at a bathroom mirror with her hands over her face. Her hands are long and spatulate and her fingers end in thick black nails that look like claws. When Liv had watched the paint in motion, the woman had stood there at the sink crying the entire time.

A baby in a crib, her mouth open wide as she cries. The baby has no arms or legs. During the time the painting moved, no one came into the room to comfort her.

A man and woman passionately kissing in a darkened room. The light through the window behind them shines on her wedding ring. He isn't wearing one.

A small boy with vivid red hair staring intensely into a basin full of water on the ground between his feet. It's a sunny day and there are trees reflected in the water. The look on his face might be curiosity. It might be disgust. It's hard to tell. The entire time the painting was in motion, the trees moved in a slight breeze, but the boy moved only once. He picked his nose and wiped it in the dirt near his foot. Then he stared into the water again.

Three nearly nude men sleeping curled together in a dim room with a straw covered floor. The room is empty, except for a metal bucket, a plastic bucket, and a

tractor tire. One of the men rolled over and yawned and Liv saw that his teeth were filed to points. She had imagined that if he smiled, he would look like a jack-o-lantern, or a saw blade. But, looking at the rest of the painting, she saw little reason for this man to smile. When the painting stopped moving, the men were still sleeping in a pile like a pack of dogs.

The last few paintings were all of the same man. In one he was shaving. In another he was talking with the red-haired boy who stared into the water. Another showed him smiling broadly and walking down a city street with a broad-shouldered young man who may have been his son; there was a similarity between the two in motion that wasn't apparent when the painting stopped moving.

In the last painting, the balding man was alone, dealing cards onto a table. At first Liv thought he was playing solitaire, but then she realized that he was practicing some kind of card trick. He did it again and again and again. The Knight of Hearts was in mid-flight between his dexterous hands and the table when the paint froze. This man wore an old-fashioned looking black suit in almost every painting. Small, silver framed glasses sat at the tip of his nose in two paintings. In the background of the one where he spoke to the red-haired boy she saw something that confirmed her circus theory. In the distance behind them was a sign, partly blocked by the man's body. The part she could see read:

FUNNELCA

PEANUT'S

HOT DO

Liv glanced uneasily at these other paintings she'd done in the last few weeks as she squeezed an enormous glob of alizarin crimson oil paint onto her palette. Though she couldn't have said why, the sight of all that red made her uneasy.

CHAPTER V

Mom and Dad were fighting again but Crane didn't care. He had bigger things to think about right now. Like how he could be nearby when Otto would fall into the Octopus. He'd seen it happen in the bowl last week so he knew it *would* happen, he just didn't know *when*. When he'd seen it he wasn't sure he'd want to see it in real life. It was totally gross. Otto would slip over the railing as he was working on the motor and he'd accidentally fix whatever had jammed it with his fall. Then the motor would clatter to noisy life, roaring and grinding, and the metal arms of the ride would begin to move, and then Otto would be...

Well, then he'd be all mushed up.

Crane tried to slip out the back door of the trailer but his mom spotted him.

"Why you still here? You're supposed to be helping Broom."

"I'm going now," he said, but his father spoke from the kitchen.

"No, Crane. Go find Caleb and see if he needs a hand."

"Mort, he needs hard work. He's too thin. Too pale. It won't cross his eyes to clean up after the animals." his mother said.

"What the boy needs is to spend time with his brother. He's got his studies tonight, so let him go. Why not let him do as he chooses? Quit being such a harpy."

His mother squawked at his father in Russian. She crossed his line of vision at the end of the hall, striding angrily to the kitchen, her long grey-streaked braid flying out

behind her. Crane doubted if she knew what a harpy was, but it was clear that she didn't like to be called one. She didn't seem to understand that her reaction just backed up what his father had just said. Then the baby started to cry. His father yelled back at his mother then and Crane took this as his moment to duck out without further notice from either of his parents.

He sprinted up the midway to the House of Terror. The gate was wide open. The carnival was still setting up and they wouldn't open until tomorrow so nobody bothered closing up much of anything at this point. The steps weren't set up yet, so he clambered up, all knees and elbows, on the ramp that led to the entrance. The door hung open wide and he stepped into the cool darkness inside.

Though it was called the House of Terror, Crane thought it would be more accurately named the Go-Cart Track of Terror. The whole ride was silly. You sat in a little two-seat car and bumped and jerked along a dark track through the two story structure. All of it at less than five miles an hour. Booooooring.

He remembered one time when he'd ridden a rickety old coaster at Myrtle Beach called the Mad Mouse. Short but sweet. And so fast you felt like your fillings might fly out of your head on the turns. If this thing was anything like that it could be fun, but the way it was now was a big snooze fest.

Bumpity bump, crawling at a snail's pace through the first few rooms where animatronic monsters, their hydraulics hissing and spitting thrust out over the tracks then slowly eased back into their cubbyholes to wait for the next car. Who would be afraid of

this crap? Nobody but a baby, Crane thought. That's who. A baby like stupid little Benjamin.

He found the access ladder to the second story and went up. He walked through shafts of sunlight that filtered through the cracks in the wooden façade of the building, dust swirling in the beams so thick it looked like you could take a bite of it and chew it up. The House of Terror wasn't really a house in that sense, either; it was just some tracks with a shell built around it. Nothing about it was what you thought it might be, Crane thought. It wasn't a house, there was nothing terrifying about any of it. He went to the far wall where the track turned sharply before going back down to the first level. There was a big crack here near the floor and he laid down in front of it. The sunlight was crazy bright after the darkness inside and it took his eyes a moment to adjust. Then he could see just fine.

And there it was: The Octopus. The ride had eight curved arms with cars at the end of each. When the carnival was in full swing on a Friday night, each one of those cars would hold two (usually screaming) passengers. The cars themselves were on bearings and spun in circles at the end of the arms. The arms went up and down on powerful pistons. They radiated from the center hub where the motor was housed. The entire hub spun at high speed on its base as it raised and lowered the arms. Fast, Crane thought. Like the Mad Mouse.

Except now it wasn't working. And as if the thought had summoned him, here came Otto.

Crane breathed the dusty air and watched with a growing sense of dread and wonder and- was it hope?- as Otto pulled the cover off the casing that housed the enormous motor of the broken Octopus. It was happening *now*.

Crane watched. His heart thudded loudly in his chest. He could hear it in the arm his head rested on. Soon now. Soon Otto would slip and the machine would come alive and-

And then he had a different kind of vision. Nothing so glamorous or wonderful feeling as the things he sometimes saw in water or glass or smoke or even the static on the television between channels. No, this was a more ordinary sort of vision.

He saw himself running outside and calling out to Otto.

I could stop it, he thought. I could be a hero.

But then he saw more. He saw Otto yelling at him to go away and find something better to do than bug him while he was trying to work. He saw Otto fixing the machine, oblivious of the messy, painful death he'd just narrowly avoided. Sure, Crane thought, I'd know I'd saved his life, but nobody else would. If his body doesn't fall in, it won't happen that way, of course it won't and nobody will ever know that it would have. Except me.

In his unseen perch in the House of Terror, Crane smiled. The power of life or death over this man. He might not be muscular like Caleb or little like Benjamin, but he knew things they did not and that knowing made him stronger than both.

Maybe even stronger than his father.

Crane watched. He waited. When Otto slipped and the machine roared to life, he didn't look away. He could see things before they happened. Powerful things. Things that mattered. How in the world could he look away from that?

CHAPTER VI

Stela rocked the baby as she held the bottle to his mouth. She hummed a lullaby, badly out of tune. She was gifted at many things, but singing would never be one of them. Unlike the baby's mother, Harmony, Stela thought. That woman could have sang the bite out of a lion

Harmony had died during childbirth and her twin sister, Grace, was raising Benjamin. She'd made Mort and Stela the godparents. When she needed a sitter, they were the first ones she asked. Grace was out with her boyfriend but would be back in about an hour. Caleb and Mort would have returned by then and would be wanting their dinner. Stela sighed and put the baby back in the folding crib.

She looked around the trailer that was their home. It was the biggest most luxurious trailer that Mort could find. The salesman at the place where they had bought the R.V. had demonstrated how, with the push of a button, a room would slide out of the side of the trailer, making it even larger on the inside. Still...Stella thought, it was still a trailer.

It was much more grand than any of the places she had lived until she met him, but when she'd married Mort she had expected much more. Someday, he'd told her, we'll sell the carnival and find a house. The house you want, Stela. The house with fields and horses.

But it had been fifteen years now and they were still on the road. In a house on wheels.

She was tired of all of Mort's broken promises. She was tired of him undermining her with Caleb and Crane. She was tired of Mort. In many ways, she had been tired of him almost from the moment she'd married him.

She rinsed the empty baby-bottle in the sink then flopped down on the sofa.

She was tired.

She must have dozed off because the spiraling siren of the ambulance woke her. She looked at the clock and saw that only a few minutes had passed since she'd finished feeding Benjamin. He was still sleeping soundly. There was never any telling what might wake a baby, she thought. Some would wake at the sound of a whisper-quiet step in the hallway: this one now slept through the wail of an ambulance.

She peeked out the curtains and saw the ambulance inching along the midway. The siren cut off in mid scream and then the baby started to cry. She went to the phone in the kitchen and called Caleb. He was on the walkie-talkie and would be able to tell her what had happened.

She'd expected that one of the carnies had gotten drunk and gotten into a fight and hurt someone. In the depths of her heart- though she would never admit such a thought; to admit it aloud would be to give it power, she thought- she had feared that the geeks had gotten loose. Caleb told her there had been an accident. They assumed it was

Otto since he was usually the one who worked on that ride, but there wasn't much left of him to identify.

Crane came in the back door and she thanked Caleb and told him to be careful.

"Crane?" She went to his room and found him sitting on his bed, taking off his shoes. "Where have you been? Did you go help Broom?" Broom was the caretaker of the animals in the petting zoo.

"Nah."

"What have you been doing?" she asked. He was filthy. Streaked with dust and sweat from head to toe.

"Nothing," he said. He pulled off his socks and t-shirt. The skin of his chest was so pale it seemed almost to glow from within. His arms and face were sun-reddened.

There was something in his eyes that she didn't like, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She thought it might be arrogance. It was a look she had seen on her brother's face when they were small, when he'd taunted her with a secret.

"There was an accident," she said. "Did you hear?"

"I saw the ambulance."

"What happened?" she asked. She decided she would provoke that arrogance. It had usually worked with her brother. "Why am I asking you? It's not like you know anything about it..." She turned to go.

"Otto Bender fell in the gearbox of the Octopus," he said. "It was a real mess."

"You sure it was Otto?"

"Oh, yeah," Crane said. "It was Otto, alright."

She turned to face him again. “And how are you so sure, when even his friends who know him best can’t tell from what’s left of him?”

She’d had the suspicion that he had not only seen it happen, but had known that it would. Like her great-grandmother, the boy had the sight. He’d known that Harmony was pregnant before Harmony had even known. He’d known that the fire that had burned the Maze of Mirrors to the ground would come in the winter and it had. He’d told her many things that he’d seen. Now that he was growing taller, he had no interest, it seemed, in talking with his mother anymore. Most children outgrow their parents at some point, she believed, but was saddened to see it happening so soon.

She stepped over to the bed and took his face in her hands. “What did you see?”

She felt concern for him, and love, and fear for his safety. If he’d seen it happen... Something like that could hurt a child in their heart for a lifetime. She could see in his eyes that he was trying to decide what to tell her. She hoped it would be the truth.

“Nothing, Mom. I heard some guys talking over by the Tilt-a-Whirl and I figured it had to be Otto cause he always works on the rides.” He smiled at her. “You worry too much.”

She hugged him. “Of course I worry, *babushka*. That’s what mothers do.”

Stella left him alone then but was far from easy in her thoughts. She didn’t know which bothered her more: that her son had just lied to her, or the possibility that he had know what would happen to Otto and had told no one about it. A person who could do

such a thing... No mother wants to believe that their child is unkind. She shuddered. A person capable of something like that would be a *zhivotnoye*: a beast.

CHAPTER VII

Ed Caldwell had been considering home schooling Anna since he'd first suspected her newfound ability. He'd given it much more consideration when Anna had called him from home one morning and said she was home sick. She was supposed to have gone swimming with the neighbors. She'd coughed dramatically then when her mother had left the room she'd whispered that she was *really* home because it had happened again. When she'd woken up her pajamas were trying to crawl off of her body. She'd put them in a Hefty bag and he'd taken them out that night and disposed of them as he had with the tiger and the pillow. Chop, chop, no more crawling 'jamas.

Shortly after Anna's 6th birthday, she'd decided that she wanted, more than anything in the world, to be a gymnast. She did headstands against every wall she was near. She turned cartwheels in the yard. She did endless summersaults across the carpet. She worked on doing a split and practiced jumping from the front porch steps then throwing her arms up in a victory stance.

On Anna's first day of school, Ed was teaching when a harried looking aide came in and handed him a note from the principal. Your daughter's school called- said it's urgent. He was immediately convinced that his would-be gymnast had cracked her head open or broken her neck, or, at the very least, had broken *some* bone. He asked the aide to stay with his students and ran to the office to use the phone. Five minutes later he was in his car and speeding to Anna's school.

When he got there, Anna was in the principal's office. He saw her through the glass window at the front of the office; her short legs didn't reach the floor and she kicked her feet in the air, her arms wrapped around herself. He went in and sat beside her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She continued looking at the floor and nodded glumly.

"What happened, sweetheart? Can you tell me about it?"

"Naptime happened," she said.

Kindergarten is a magical place where you draw and sing and eat snacks and take naps and learn about cool things like the alphabet and numbers and colors. Anna had never been a fan of naps. Even as a baby, she'd tended to sleep through the night and was hell-on-wheels for the other sixteen or so hours of the day. When Mrs. Pavco had given her a mat, she'd looked at her teacher as if there'd been some sort of mistake. But Mrs. Pavco had insisted that all of the children lie down for at least thirty minutes.

"You don't have to sleep," she'd said, "you can just lie quietly with your eyes closed and listen to the music with the rest of the class."

Then Mrs. Pavco had put on some soft soothing music- piano and flutes with nature sounds; Anna could make out the sound of rain and frogs on one song, thunder and wind chimes on another. She had lain there in the darkened classroom floor, thinking she was too keyed up to rest. So thinking, she fell sound asleep. Twenty minutes later, she awoke to the sound of Mrs. Pavco screaming.

“I don’t understand. It hadn’t happened again in a long time,” she said.

Ed Caldwell had an idea that this might have been exactly why it had happened. Her power is something like a pressure cooker, I think. It builds and builds and if you don’t release some of the pressure from time to time... Well, all of that energy had to go somewhere.

And when she wasn’t actively making something, *making* it happen, it found a way to happen on its own. Like an emergency release valve. It came out when she was most relaxed.

But that was also when she was most vulnerable, and that worried the hell out of him. What if someday she brought an extension cord to life? Or a tool box? He had a clear image then- so clear that if he’d been superstitious he might have thought it was a vision; he saw the table saw in the garage flexing its metal legs and lumbering into the house through the kitchen door, its edges scraping the paint from the doorframe as it pushed its way in and a shudder of revulsion and fear went through him.

“Maybe that’s the problem, honey.” He pulled her over onto his lap and she put her arms around his neck, laid her head on his shoulder. She was getting so big. It wouldn’t be long before she would be too big to pick up and hold like this. “When’s the last time you did it?”

“The pajamas, but I didn’t mean to do it.” She pulled her head back and looked into his eyes. “The last time I did it on purpose was when you asked me to.”

“I think you might *have* to do it once in a while on purpose so it doesn’t happen by accident.”

“Like going potty so you don’t pee your pants?” she asked.

He laughed out loud and she smiled back at him. A small smile, but it did his heart good to see it. Leave it to a six-year-old, he thought, to come up with the perfect metaphor. “Yeah, exactly like that. I think that’s just right.”

Then the principal, an aging man with a tight nest of silver curls and gentle eyes, came in the office door with the school nurse. “Mr. Caldwell?” he said.

“That’s me,” Ed said. He sat Anna on the seat beside him and stood up. “What’s the problem?”

The principal shook Ed’s hand. “I’m Gary Thiebaud. This is May Shmidt.” The nurse shook Ed’s hand, too. Her scrubs were covered with a wild profusion of pictures of cartoon kittens. When did nurses stop wearing actual uniforms, Ed wondered, and start wearing these busy prints with cartoons and such all over them? Maybe it was meant to distract the patient from whatever was wrong with them. It had certainly distracted him.

The nurse said, “There was an... incident in Anna’s class today and...” She stopped and looked at Anna. “Honey? Why don’t you go with Principal Thiebaud for a few minutes so me and your daddy can talk?” Anna looked at her father and he nodded. She followed the principal out into the lobby.

“What the hell happened?” Ed asked, as soon as they were out of earshot.

“It’s complicated,” she said, color rising in her cheeks. “Anna’s teacher has been taken to the hospital. She had to be sedated and treated for burns and lacerations.”

Ed’s pulse sped. My god, Anna, he thought. What have you done?

She pulled a notepad out of her pocket and flipped back through a few pages. “She wasn’t making much sense when I got to the classroom, but what she told me was that a paper mache’ dragon had flown around the room and then bit her and set her on fire. Ridiculous, right?”

Ed crossed his arms. “So, one of your teachers went crazy today. What does this have to do with my daughter?”

“I have reports from the teacher and from most of the other students that Anna apologized and told the teacher that it was her fault that the dragon was alive.” She smiled and shook her head. “I know, the whole thing is kind of preposterous, but when a child tries to claim that they are responsible for other people’s, that sort of displacement and guilt are usually a sign that there’s something going on at home that may be causing the child to feel an undue sense of…” The nurse went on and on, but Ed was no longer really listening. They thought that Anna had a bad home life and was acting out when the teacher had had a breakdown and hurt herself. That she was used to taking the blame upon herself for whatever violence she witnessed. Never mind that half the class had claimed to see the dragon, its jaws clamped tight on the teacher’s wrist as she fought to tear it loose. Some of the children had claimed to see flames licking from the dragon’s mouth. They’d all agreed that Anna had run to the sink and returned with a bucket of water and thrown it on both the teacher and the dragon. That she’d ripped the dragon free from the teachers arm and stomped on it until it was a pile of soggy, pulpy mush. And then cried and told the teacher that she was sorry that she’d hurt her. That it was an accident.

It was all Ed could do to not smile. Breathing a sigh of relief that he allowed the nurse to interpret as whatever she liked, he said, "First of all, there's nothing going on at home that would cause my daughter to feel a misplaced sense of guilt. Secondly, what kind of place are you idiots running here? You hire psychotics to teach the children?" The nurse stammered and a livid blush crept up her face from the neck of her kitten covered scrub shirt. Ed felt just a little sorry for her then, but continued with his indignant father act. "Finally, she's six years old, for crying out loud. In my experience, six year olds are imaginative as hell. If she told you it was her fault that it was raining outside, would you listen?"

"We don't believe she *was* responsible, Mr. Caldwell, just that she seems to believe that she is. Our concern at this point is for Anna's mental well-being."

"Well, I thank you for your concern, but I think your real concern, clearly, should be the mental well-being of your teachers." He walked out the door and found Anna and the principal sitting on a wooden bench just inside the main doors. They both looked bored and unhappy.

"Come on, Anna," Ed said. "We're going."

The nurse spoke from behind him as he pushed open the door. "I hope you'll at least think about taking her to counseling. It's not healthy for a child to have that kind of sense of guilt."

You're right about that, at least, he thought. On the ride home he sang along with the radio and listened as Anna told him about the rest of her day. When they got home he went to the garage to think.

They had dodged a bullet today. If another adult had seen what had happened... he didn't even like to think about where that could have led. If Anna hadn't been so quick to destroy it, what would the school nurse have had to say about the dragon, then?

He needed to plan, to come up with a way that he could help her transform the guilt that she felt into something more healthy. He thought that if he could help her figure out how to control her ability to animate things, that might kill two birds with one stone. It might keep it from happening when she didn't mean for it to, and it might give her a feeling of control over what was happening which would also help alleviate the guilt. Just as long as the things she made didn't hurt anyone, he thought.

He pondered what he'd seen her do so far. He thought that the variation in the outcome really came down to a few factors; the materials she used, the length of time that it took them to come to life, and the final design. For instance, she had made cookies come alive within forty-five minutes or so, but the Play-Doh animals on her dresser had taken considerably longer. None of those had been particularly dangerous. The same went for the pillow and the pajamas. So, why had the tiger become dangerous?

Because *she* knows tigers are dangerous, he thought. And that dragons bite and breathe fire. It's her perception of what something is that shapes what it will become.

The material she used may have something to do with how long it took for the thing to come alive but it didn't seem to have any bearing on how "real" it became in the end. He thought of the tiger's fur, so much more real by the time he'd slit its belly. Not to mention its claws. They had been real, alright. He had a scar on his left hand to remind him anytime he began to question the veracity of his own sanity.

But really, where was that end? Everything she'd made so far had been destroyed.

Well. *Almost* everything. Sometimes daddies have secrets of their own.

He hadn't destroyed the last thing she'd made from the Play-Doh. The little red girl. They had sat together and watched it for hours when she'd finished sculpting until the little girl had begun to move. Only five and a quarter inches tall, with perfectly formed features and realistic details on the t-shirt and shorts and shoes that Anna had sculpted onto her form. Anna had made a perfect miniature of herself. He had picked it up and was going to smash it as he had the other Play-Doh creations, but then the tiny red girl had smiled up at him with his daughter's face.

He couldn't do it. He'd taken it away and told Anna that he was going to watch it for awhile. He had. But he had never been able to bring himself to destroy it. She still lived, in a box in the garage.

And she was changing.

Ed decided that he and Anna would start doing some experiments tomorrow. He went in the house, kissed his wife and asked her when she would be going to the grocery store again.

"I can go in a little while, if you'd like," she said.

He wrote a list of things he wanted. She looked at it and laughed. "What in the world, Ed!" She read off the list. "Instant mashed potatoes, whipped cream, marshmallows, angelfood cake mix, vanilla ice cream and..." she laughed again- "Cheeze Whiz! Are you planning to make mashed potatoes and cheese with an angel-food cake sundae for dessert? Sounds like you might be pregnant."

He took the list from her hand and wrote the number 2 in front of the Cool Whip. Then he smacked his hand against his forehead and wrote two more items. "I almost forgot the most important things," he said.

She looked at the two things he'd added. Jello and Knox unflavored gelatin.

"Can't mold finger Jello without the Knox," he said. He saw the perplexed look on her face and said, "It's part of Anna's science lesson. I want to home school her."

"I can teach her English, History, Geography, and the arts if you do all of the sciencey and mathey stuff," Diane said. They'd talked of doing this and had even looked up the state requirements. They hadn't wanted her in public school but couldn't afford a private school. She sounded happy that he'd made the decision.

She picked up his hodge-podge of supplies from the grocery store and that night when Diane went to yoga class, Ed yelled for Anna to come to the kitchen.

He'd lined the Cool Whip, marshmallows, and ice cream up on the kitchen counter. She saw them and said, "Oooh! Sundaes!"

He dipped a finger in the Cool Whip and popped it into his mouth. "We're going to do an experiment, sweetie," he said. "It should be pretty easy, I think. Before we start I want to explain a couple of things about doing experiments."

"Like what?" she asked.

He handed her a spatula and pulled the lid off the ice cream. "Like variables," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

The new Mirror Maze was nearly complete. Mort and Caleb walked side by side through the twisting passages, though in some places there was only enough room for them to walk single file. Then Caleb would walk ahead and Mort walked close behind him, his hand resting lightly on his son's shoulder. Caleb was the only one who knew the entire Maze well, at this point. He should; he'd designed it.

Caleb approached his reflection and put his hand out in front of him. His reflection did the same. He walked forward until their palms touched then closed his eyes for a moment.

"We take a right, here," he said. He led the way forward again. On all sides of them their reflections kept pace.

Mort recited the way back in his head; left, left at the four-way, the second right, right again, third left, left, left, left, second left, then the last right. It was a path that made no logical sense. It should have them walking in a big circle, but it didn't. But it didn't matter. It worked, that's what mattered.

He watched the reflections around them as Caleb led him along, left hand trailing on the glass. A white haired man with his hand on the shoulder of a boy who looked about fifteen but was nearly eighteen. Mort had hoped that when Caleb hit his teens that he would finally sprout up like he had, but though Caleb had grown some, it had stopped well short of what Mort had hoped for. The boy had grown broad rather than tall. His

back was wide and muscular, his arms and neck thick and sturdy. But he was nearly a full head shorter than his father.

Mort had hoped his first son would have the body of an athlete. Caleb, stocky and utilitarian, was built more like a bull. Mort figured he might grow another inch or two, but he'd never be more than five-foot-eight. Mort himself was six-foot-two.

Mort had thought on more than one occasion that Caleb must get his height from Stela's side of the family. Though Stela was nearly six-feet tall, he remembered her father, shriveled and hunched, barely taller than a child.

Crane will be tall, he thought, but the thought gave him no comfort. Crane was strange to him- with his red hair and his odd gold-green eyes, lanky and fast and all knobby-knees and elbows and knuckles. Though Crane was only nine, he was already nearly as tall as his brother.

Caleb was approaching his reflection head on again. Again he touched the other Caleb, palm to palm. They twisted and turned through the maze, now left, now straight for what felt like a quarter mile- patently impossible, Mort knew, but the thought didn't worry him.

He pulled his watch from his pocket and saw they'd been walking for nearly an hour. He asked Caleb to stop.

Mort took his glasses from his breast pocket and put them on. His distance vision was good, but his near vision had deteriorated quickly over the last few years. He pulled a folded piece of paper from his inside pocket. It was dog-eared and worn thin at the creases. He opened it. One side showed a hand-drawn map. This was not the first map

that had traveled in his pocket through these passages. He'd attempted to draw the layout of this maze, numerous times, but it confounded him. Like the illogical series of left turns that should have led them in a circle, the geography of this place defied reason.

One time he had dropped a trail of bright pennies as they'd navigated the corridors, thinking that they would come upon them again as his son led him in circles. But they hadn't, and he'd followed the trail back, picking them up as he went, and they led him straight back to the entrance. There was no way to use a two-dimensional surface to map the maze because if you did, you would cross over the paths you had already drawn, and he knew they never crossed.

Mort flipped the map and looked over his notes on the other side. He jotted down the last few turns, checking them against ones he'd made the day before. He'd had a suspicion that Caleb might be leading him a different way today, but he was mistaken. The turns were exactly the same as the last time, but something seemed different.

Almost as if reading his mind, Caleb said, "I changed a few things since yesterday."

"What things?" Mort asked. Caleb was always the first one awake, up before the sun, and would disappear into the maze for hours at a time. Mort had tried to follow him and find him, but only once.

He'd gone the way they always went. First right, then left, then right again, then second right, then...bam! He'd ran smack into his own startled reflection. He'd back-tracked the way he'd come, thinking he'd accidentally missed a turn, but the path had changed. He took a right, then the second left, then walked into a dead-end. He'd

wandered around, keeping his hands out in front of him for another couple of minutes then just stood and waited. Caleb, he knew, had built in a fail-safe.

The maze was designed something like a combination lock. Unless you knew the exact turns to make, in exactly the right order, you couldn't go any deeper into the maze. If you took an incorrect turn from Caleb's path, or tried to backtrack and took a wrong turn, you'd wander for ten minutes then find the exit. If their customers became hopelessly lost in the maze for hours on end, how would they ever find time to spend their money at the rest of the carnival? After ten minutes, all you had to do was walk to the nearest left or right hand turn and it would lead you to the exit.

After that day, he'd insisted that Caleb must tell him about any changes.

"I made that long corridor longer and added a few more false left turns." Caleb frowned and looked troubled. "But don't worry, Dad, the path we take is still the same."

Mort looked at his son over the rim of his glasses as he folded the map. Caleb chewed his bottom lip, something he'd done since he was small whenever something worried him.

"Is everything ready, then? Yes? Then we can open the maze tomorrow." He tucked the map back into his inside pocket.

"Yeah, but..."

"But, what? What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure where some of the new paths go, yet." Caleb chewed his lip again.

"Does it matter? No one will ever get this far. We're over an hour into the maze by the time you reach those paths, right?"

“Yeah...” Caleb sounded unsure.

“No one will ever find their way this deep into the maze, son. You’ve seen to that.” He put his arm around Caleb’s shoulders and gave him a squeeze. “You’ve done a great job. I couldn’t ask for any better.”

This was mostly true. That Caleb had inherited his mother’s gift was more than Mort had hoped for. He’d had hopes, when he and Stela had first married, of having a son who would one day take over the carnival, but in some ways, this was better.

They’d tried for years to have a child. There were a few false starts; twice the children they’d conceived had been born long before their bodies could sustain life outside of the womb. He’d buried one of them by moon light in the cold Texas desert and the other, two years later, in the shade of a chestnut tree in southwestern Pennsylvania. Stela had not wanted to try anymore. She’d wept for her babies and they’d spent a long year in separated beds. But eventually she’d come around. And Caleb had come to them, an easy birth but an uneasy child. He was cat-natured and so quiet that most times you would forget he was even in the room.

Caleb would never be a showman; he was nervous in crowds and sometimes stammered if he felt put on the spot. He would never be able to get up in front of an audience and showboat the way he would have to if he wanted to take up as a magician.

And Crane? That boy, where magic was concerned, was simply useless. He had no interest or talent, whatsoever. When Mort had tried to show him the basics of illusion, he’d watched with eyes as flat as dust-covered marbles. He’d said, “That’s cool, Dad.” And then he’d yawned. *Yawned.*

It would have been wonderful if both of his boys had been born with either interest or ability when it came to magic, but, Mort mused, one out of two was not bad. Not bad at all.

CHAPTER IX

North Carolina summers can be blisteringly hot, and the arrival of autumn is a welcome reprieve from the relentless heat and humidity. Liv hiked to the mailbox at the end of her gravel drive and wished that the weather would cool just a little quicker.

It was mid-September, but still over eighty degrees according to the thermometer on the front porch. The herbs were wilting, and the tomatoes had died off back in July, victims of drought, and Liv's inattention. But she hadn't been too broken up about losing them. If she wanted fresh, homegrown tomatoes, all she had to do was wait. Every two weeks or so, Irv Hammacher or his wife, Helen, would drop by with a bag of produce for her. Not just tomatoes, either. Irv and Helen grew corn, green beans, peas, cabbage, melons, squash, cucumbers, grapes, blackberries, and rhubarb. Liv had asked Irv once if they ever grew any other kinds of beans.

"I don't care for none but the green beans," he'd replied. "'Sides, if I grew em, Helen might try to make me eat em. Life's too short to eat food I don't like."

Helen and Irv were Liv's closest neighbors. They lived half a mile down the gravel road, their two-story farmhouse surrounded by woods on either side, their front lawn a neatly manicured flower garden. They were in their late forties. Helen was a nurse in Burlington and Irv did some kind of mail-order watch repair when he wasn't coaching youth football. In the summers, sometimes Liv drove by and saw Irv throwing a football on the lawn with their niece, Adrienne.

Liv had bought the last house on the end of the dead end road so she had no other nearby neighbors. She liked it that way. She wasn't exactly anti-social, but had come to the knowledge that people were unreliable at best. She'd been living in this house now for nearly five years. Before Boone's Glen, she'd been all over the place.

She'd left her grandmother's at sixteen and worked a variety of odd-jobs. She'd been a waitress in El Centro, California (the center of exactly nothing, she'd thought) for about a year, then moved to Las Vegas and tried her hand as a blackjack dealer. No luck, there. She was clumsy and inept at it. She had started cocktailing. Every night she went back to her tiny, hole-in-the-wall apartment and cooked something quick and easy for dinner. Then she had spent the rest of the night immersed in her drawings.

She'd long ago traded the Crayolas for colored pencils. Now when she drew, her fingers leapt nimbly from the pile of pencils to the page, covering them with incredibly realistic renderings of the scenes taking place as she drew them. She'd kept a folder of her favorite drawings: her grandmother cooking in their tiny kitchen in Long Beach; her sister trying on coats in a J.C. Penney; a man in cook's whites chopping carrots in a chrome-shiny kitchen, and many more. Most were mysteries when she'd originally drawn them. People she'd never met, like Barney, the cook at The Iron Skillet. It was like keeping a scrapbook of other peoples' lives. Or like keeping a diary of lives that would one day intersect with her own.

One night, a man in a bright yellow suit had tipped her \$300 and asked if she'd ever thought of being a showgirl. She'd seen this coming, in a way. Some of her drawings over the last month had shown beautiful women in bizarre costumes, replete

with ornate jewels and feathered headdresses. Liv had smiled and told him, "I'll try anything, once."

She'd tried it and liked it. She found a grace on the stage that she'd lacked as a card-dealer. Most of the girls were nice and she made a few friends and had a lot of fun. No one seemed to care that she was only seventeen.

One night after a show, she'd gone with the girls to the bar. A cute guy with long hair had sent Liv a drink and an invitation to join him. Daniel. They talked until late into the night. He lived here in town and worked at the Mirage as a valet. They had more drinks. He stole a kiss. Could he see her again? He could and did. He came to all of her shows when he wasn't working and she lost her virginity to him in his tiny apartment to the sound of his roommates arguing in the next room.

Then he started getting busy. She called him one night after work (he hadn't come to her show) and he'd sounded distracted on the phone.

"Do you want to come over?" she'd asked.

"I would, babe, but I'm really tired."

He'd sounded tired. But he'd also sounded like he wasn't happy to hear from her. At all.

She'd picked up her pencils and hoped. She had no control over what her drawings would be. She'd tried, many, many times, to draw a specific person to find out what they were doing, but it was a crap shoot. She'd never been able to predict what the next drawing might show.

Her hands had flown over the page and when the drawing started to move, it was more than she could have hoped for- and exactly what she had feared.

The drawing showed Daniel leading a cute brunette into his bedroom. Did she really want to see this? They stood by his bed and kissed, his hands crawling all over her.

Liv had looked away. She had witnessed many private scenes in her drawings (some, like one of a man using the bathroom in the snow, were fairly laughable) but she always turned away if they were *too* intimate. So she turned the drawing over and stared at the blank side of the paper. She'd seen more than enough.

When Daniel had come to see her at work the next day she'd asked him if he was seeing someone else.

"What!?" He'd looked truly taken aback that she'd even ask such a thing. Her stomach had rolled with dismay. "No way, honey. You're the only one I want." He'd tried to take her hand.

She jerked her hand away. "Who's the brunette you were with last night? The one with the blue dress?"

His eyes widened. "She's just some girl I knew in high school," he said. "I ran into her at work and we had a drink before I went home." His adam's apple had bobbed up and down as he spoke. "Who told you?" he asked.

"You lying asshole." She'd turned and walked away. He came after her and she told him to leave her alone or she'd call for security. He'd left then and she'd cried that night, hurt that someone could pretend to care so much for her then do the kind of things

he'd done. But she got over it. Life was too short to spend any of it with someone capable of lying to her face.

Liv opened the mailbox and saw that the package had arrived. Good, she thought. Now I can get back to work.

She trekked back up the gravel drive, whistling a song by the Rolling Stones. She let the front door screen slam behind her then pulled off her boots and socks and padded barefoot to the kitchen. She took a knife from the dish drainer and slit the tape on the cardboard box.

She pulled out six cans of Gamblin oil paint. She usually used tubes, but she was working on a larger scale now, and the tubes were almost all squeezed dry. This morning she'd placed another, much larger, order for paint, but these at least would keep her working until they arrived tomorrow by overnight mail.

She tucked the paint back in the box and carried it, under her arm, out the back door.

She walked barefoot through her over-grown grass (need to hop on the riding mower soon, she thought) and started whistling again. She was a terrible singer, even to her own ears, but she heard the lyrics in her head: *I see a red door and I want to paint it black...* Then she opened the door to her new studio.

The house was old- built in the 20's, the realtor had told her- but the barn seemed much newer, probably built sometime in the last ten years. The realtor had also told her

that the barn had been used by the previous owner to store his show cars. She'd said that it was really more of a garage than a barn.

The walls were unfinished but Liv was already thinking of hiring a contractor to do some sheetrock and insulation. Then she'd be able to paint out here year round. She marveled that it hadn't occurred to her by now. Well, before now, the largest canvas she'd worked on had been no more than about two feet by three feet. Not anymore.

She'd mounted brackets on one wall on which to mount her canvas. The new canvas was six high by eight feet long. There were other, finished canvases leaned against the wall beside it. They weren't quite as large as the blank canvas that hung waiting for her brush, but they were still the largest paintings she had ever done.

One showed Anna in a yellow swimsuit on the beach with Diane. They were holding hands and they both looked very happy. That one was a definite keeper. Another showed Anna sitting on a wooden bench beside a man in a suit. Anna looked desperately unhappy. When the painting had been moving, Liv had watched them walk to the bench, then the man appeared to make a half-hearted attempt to start conversation. Anna had shrugged in reply. Then they'd sat there until the paint stopped moving and Liv had noticed a bulletin board on the wall above them. They were in a school. She gazed at her niece's face and wished that she could reach into the painting, hug her, tell her whatever had made her so unhappy couldn't possibly be as bad as she thought it was.

But Liv knew better than that. Some things could be just that bad, and then some.

Next to this painting was a much happier scene. Anna and Ed, in the kitchen a few days later, making some kind of desserts, or so Liv had thought, until one of the desserts

had begun to move. Anna had clapped her hands and her father had looked nervous but had patted her on the back. Liv stared in wonder. Not only does he know what she can do, he's *encouraging* her to do it, she had thought. Lucky girl. Not everybody will be so understanding.

On the other side of the room were more of the Freaks and Geeks paintings, and more of the man she'd come to think of as The Magician. She thought she even had a name for him now.

One painting showed him standing on a midway at a carnival. There was a ferris wheel in the background, and other rides she recognized from fairs she'd been to over the years- a Tilt-a-Whirl, the Zipper, and the Round-Up- the only ride that had ever made her physically ill. She'd ridden one when she was about thirteen and just getting over an ear infection. She'd made it through the ride then had walked jerkily down the ramp and thrown up in a garbage can overflowing with empty soda cups, and half-eaten funnel cakes and candy apples. All this time later, just looking at the Round-Up made her stomach roll.

The Magician was standing in the foreground talking with a middle-aged black man. The black man wore coveralls and there was a nametag on the left side of his chest. She had finished the painting then, as always, she had been frozen in place as it had started to move.

The lights on the rides swirled and whirled. The ferris wheel turned lazily in the background and nearer the Tilt-A-Whirl spun and Liv imagined she could almost hear the screams of the passengers.

The black man said something to The Magician. The Magician nodded and shifted to his right and that's when Liv saw the banner behind him- Temple and Sons Carnival and- but then The Magician shifted back and the banner was hidden again.

I'd bet the old red barn that you're Temple, she had thought. So, Mr. Magician, Mr. Temple, sir, would you like to tell me why in the hell you are in my paintings?

The black man had shifted, too, and she'd seen that the nametag on his shirt said "Broom." Then he'd tucked his hands in his pockets and the painting had stopped.

Liv had a cart on wheels with a piece of thick glass set on top of it for her palette. She set the package on the floor beside it then used a screwdriver to open the cans of paint. She used a palette knife to scoop gobs of the paint to the glass, wiping the knife on a rag between each color so she wouldn't sully the next. She rolled the cart up to the blank canvas. She picked up a brush and reached up as high as she could with it. The canvas was just so damn big. She felt a rush of excitement. As always, looking at the endless possibility held in that expanse of blank white canvas was exhilarating and a little intimidating. Anything could happen there. Anything at all.

She stretched and made sure all of her brushes and rags were near at hand. This one will be a workout, she thought, then she touched her brush to the palette and then the whole world swam away from her. She painted for over four hours, covering the canvas with pigment from edge to edge, stopping only to take more paint from the cans though later she would have no memory of doing so.

Her brushes darted and dabbed, stroked and coaxed the pigments into position. Yellow ochre, burnt sienna, and titanium white, a touch of that red that Rembrandt had

loved so well for creating a blushing tone to the skin, the one who's name she could never remember, then cadmium red and yellow made a vivid orange, and alizarin crimson and ivory black and teeth bared and what was the name of that color and ultramarine and white and the dishes are in the sink and there's a bit of hooker's green outside the kitchen window and burnt umber his hair is so dark and hers is not so dark so add more yellow ochre and the dress is titanium white with pink flowers not pink with cadmium red but that other one that red with the funny name and-

And then she came back to herself and she was dripping with sweat and had never wanted anything so badly as she wanted a glass of her sweet iced tea but again she had to stay. The image on the canvas was so large that she had to step back a bit to see the whole thing at one time. Oh, no, she thought. *No*.

She wanted to yell to Ed and Anna to warn them but there was nothing she could do. Her cramping hands dropped her brushes to the floor and she watched, helpless, as the paint began to move.

CHAPTER X

“Daddy!” Anna squealed. “It’s happening!”

They stood at the kitchen counter, watching the strange creation on the cookie sheet come to life.

Over the last few weeks her father had asked her to make so many different things. Marshmallows dunked in red food coloring, decorated with black frosting dots and licorice legs became ladybugs. Fifteen minutes or so later, they scampered around the bowl that held them. Her father had dumped the bowl into a pot of boiling water. A mound of mashed potatoes had sat dead still for only five minutes before it began to squirm sluggishly across the counter, then her father had scooped it into the sink with the dustpan and rinsed it down the drain. Ice cream, mostly melted from her touch, shaped into balls with gum drop eyes and frosting feet had tried to waddle off the counter. So many more. But this one was the best yet.

“It’s happening so fast with this one,” her father said.

They’d started baking the angel food cake when her father got home from work.

“That smells wonderful,” her mother said. “Save me a piece for later.” Anna had felt a twinge of guilt at that because she wasn’t sure there would be any left when her mother got home later.

As soon as her mother had left for yoga her father had cut the cake in half and put one half on the cookie sheet. He’d opened the frostings and candies and handed Anna the

spatula. On the counter beside the cookie sheet he'd laid out a fork, a knife, some toothpicks, and a spoon. Her new tools.

She'd known what to do.

She'd carved and pinched and squished and frosted. She'd used her fingers to shape the ears and fluffed the frosting with a fork so she could get the fur just right. Cool Whip for the tail.

Then she'd put two red-hots where the eyes should be and as a finishing touch, a pink candy heart where the nose belonged.

The bunny's pink candy nose was twitching now and its ears turned in opposite directions. Almost as if it was listening to their voices.

"I think I'm getting better at this." Anna said. She reached out to touch the bunny and it froze. The fur felt funny. Not like fur, and a little came off on her fingers, but it was already stiffer than frosting. She'd seen bunnies at the mall and had touched them and she hoped her bunny would get that soft.

Her father was jotting something in the notebook he'd started keeping in his back pocket.

"This time took less than a minute after you finished," he said. "That's definitely the quickest yet." He saw her touching the bunny again and said, "Do you want to get rid of it, or do you want me to do it?"

"I wish we could keep some of them," Anna said. The bunny was sniffed at her hand and when she moved her hand a few inches away it hopped forward to sniff it again. She *really* wanted to keep the bunny.

“I know, sweetheart, but we need to run more experiments first and make sure it’s safe,” he said. “Then maybe you can make another bunny or a-”

Then the back door opened and her mother came in.

CHAPTER XI

“Forgot my mat,” Diane said, dropping her keys and purse on the kitchen table. “I know they have a few extras there, but sometimes there aren’t enough and I-” She saw the bunny on the counter. It had frozen again. “How cute! Anna, did you make that? A bunny cake!” She laughed.

Ed walked between Diane and the rabbit on the counter. Hoped like hell that Anna would have the sense to get rid of it once her mother was out of the room.

“Where’d you leave your mat, hon? Are you going to be late?”

“I left it in the bedroom,” she said.

The rabbit jumped to the floor. One of its rear legs took on a broken, twisted look from the impact.

Diane jumped.

Ed thought he might still be able to set this right. He’d say that Anna had knocked it off the counter and now it was dirty and he’d stuff it down the garbage disposal. He’d offer Diane a piece of the other half of the cake and she’d say no, maybe later, and she’d grab her mat and be on her way. Crisis averted.

So thinking, he reached for the rabbit but it jumped again, straight toward Diane. She screeched.

Anna, quicker than her father, grabbed the rabbit and pulled it to her chest. The rabbit’s back legs kicked wildly. “It won’t hurt you, Mommy. It’s just a bunny.”

“Ed?” Her hands were in her hair as if she were trying to hold her head on. “Is it real? Is that an animal with icing on it?” She uttered a shaky laugh. “Why in the *hell* would you do that?”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” Anna said. She was starting to cry.

Just then, the rabbit’s broken leg fell off and lay on the kitchen linoleum. All three of them stared at it in wonder and dread.

Ed reached for his wife. She saw the frosting on his fingers and cringed away from him. “Honey,” he said, “it’s okay.”

Diane stared at the creature in her daughter’s arms, her mouth hanging agape. Then she said, “This is very, very far from okay.”

“I’ll get rid of it,” Anna said.

“What is it?” Diane asked. “It’s not real, is it. No. It’s not. It’s leg’s off and it’s not even bleeding.” She gave voice to a high, breathless laugh. Ed reached for her again and she screamed at him, “No! *You* don’t get to *touch* me!”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” Anna said again. She buried her face against the rabbit.

Sudden understanding dawned on Diane’s face. “*You* did this, somehow, didn’t you?” she asked her daughter. Anna was now crying so hard she couldn’t answer, could only nod her head, her hair hanging in her face. There was frosting on her cheeks and nose.

“And *you*,” she said, turning to Ed, “you were helping her do...whatever the hell she did.”

“It’s okay, hon, it’s-”

“Stop saying that!” She pointed at the rabbit, still kicking wildly in Anna’s arms. “This is not okay!” She clutched her face in both hands. Rubbed at her eyes like a tired child. “Will one of you please tell me what the hell it is?” She looked at Ed and he saw tears in her eyes, now. “Please?”

Ed took the rabbit from Anna and turned on the hot water in the sink. “Let me get rid of this first. Then I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Diane stood with one hand resting on the kitchen table, her breath coming in hiccups. She was getting ready to cry, for sure, Ed thought. He rinsed the rabbit down the sink then wet a paper towel to wipe the frosting off of Anna’s face and hands.

“This is like Olivia, isn’t it?” Diana asked. “But instead of drawings, it’s cakes.” She sobbed.

Ed wiped gently at his daughter’s nose and bit back the sudden urge to laugh. Oh, honey, he thought. You’re going to wish it was only cakes. Aloud, he said, “Yeah, babe. It’s something like that.”

CHAPTER XII

Liv rubbed her face with her paint-streaked hands, leaving a long smear of dark brown high along one cheekbone.

Oh, Anna, she thought. I hope this goes better for you than it did for me.

The painting had stopped moving with Diane sitting in a kitchen chair, Anna and Ed standing nearby, looking guiltily at one another. Liv remembered well the look on Diane's face- that look of horror and fear.

When Liv had drawn her father bringing roses to her mother and the drawing had played a scene like a movie, she'd been too weirded out at first to think too hard about what it might mean. She tried drawing again after they'd gotten home from dinner that night, but nothing out of the ordinary had happened. She'd drawn and scribbled and shaded and used her cerulean blue crayon until it was nothing but a nub, but she'd ended up with nothing more than a bunch of sheets of paper with blue scribbles all over them.

But a couple of days later when she'd tried the crayon (this time it was grass-green) flew over the page and the world went blurry and vague and when she came back to herself she saw a monochromatic green world where her mother trolled the aisles of the grocery store. Her grass-green mother put cereal then sugar then a box of cake mix into the cart. She pushed the cart to the dairy aisle and got a gallon of grass-green milk.

She picked up a carton of grass-green egg (but no grass-green ham, Liv noticed). Then, as she was rolling the cart up to the check out, the drawing stopped moving.

She'd tried to draw another, immediately.

Nothing. Just green scribbles.

As the months passed, she noticed that she was able to draw the moving pictures more often. They sometimes showed people she didn't know, and usually stopped in very dull places. It occurred to her that what she could do was something like a super-power. But of all of the super powers she could have had, she thought, why did it have to be this one? It seemed kind of useless and boring. Now, if she could turn invisible or *fly*... That would be a super power.

But even so, the drawings *were* interesting, if only because she never knew what they would be.

When she'd been making what she thought of as Her Movies for about two years, she decided to let Diane in on her secret.

"Come up and play in my room," she'd said. Diane had come along grudgingly. She was twelve and playing with her nine-year-old sister was not nearly as high on her list of priorities as talking on the phone with her friends or the PlayStation she'd just gotten for Christmas.

"You've gotta promise not to tell Mom and Dad." Liv instinctively thought that telling them might be a bad idea.

"What is it? Is it something bad?" Diane's eyes were wide with sudden interest.

“I want you to watch me draw.” Liv got her crayons and her paper and sat cross-legged on the bedroom floor, the pad of paper on her lap.

“I’ve seen you draw before, dummy,” Diane said, but had sat beside her on the floor. Maybe she had thought that it might be a naughty drawing. “You’re no Van Gogh.”

Liv wasn’t sure who Vango was, but she understood what Diane was trying to say. Her drawings *weren’t* very good. Unless she was in the throes of whatever made Her Movies, that was. Then she was a very different kind of artist. Then her drawings were... well, pretty interesting. Diane would just have to see for herself.

“Just watch for a few minutes, okay?” Liv had picked up a black crayon and put it to the paper. She’d learned that if she stopped thinking (which was harder than it sounded) that usually it would just kind of happen. She tried to clear her mind. Everything began to blur and...

...Diane was shaking her and calling her name. “Liv! Earth to Liv!” She had her by the shoulders and was shaking her like she was fluffing a pillow. Liv’s head had flopped back and forth bonelessly.

“Huh?” Liv said.

“Why didn’t you tell me you could draw like this?” Diane picked up the paper and thrust it in Liv’s face. “You’re really good!”

“You haven’t seen the best part,” Liv had said and turned the paper around so her big sister could watch it move.

It was a drawing of a guy swimming in a pool. He wore one of those swim caps and a pair of goggles. He swam from one side of the pool to the other, arms pin wheeling

as he did the butterfly stroke, gulping air at the surface with every few strokes. He went back and forth, kicking off the wall at each side. He was climbing the ladder at the end of the pool when the drawing froze. Liv and Diane stared at his muscular back.

“How did you do that?” Diane asked. Her voice was very small but her eyes were very large.

“I don’t know.” Liv had replied.

“It moved.” Diane said. “I saw it. It was moving.” She licked her lips. “I saw it.”

“Yeah,” Liv said. “Sometimes they do that.”

“How did you make it do that?” Diane picked up the piece of paper and flipped it over. Nothing on the back. Flipped it again. Stared at the muscular swimmer.

“I don’t know how it does it,” Liv had said. “Only that sometimes when I draw something, it moves for a little while and then it stops.”

“Is it going to do it again?” Diane asked.

“Nope.”

“Who is that guy? Is he a real person or somebody you made up?” Diane had asked.

“I’ve never seen him before, but he’s probably real.” Liv shrugged. “I draw real people all the time.”

“Really?” Diane looked excited at this. “Like who?”

“Like you,” Liv had said.

“Did it move like that?”

“Yeah.”

“What did it do?” Diane asked.

Liv went to her desk and opened the bottom drawer on the right. She pulled out a few books and an empty Sea Monkey aquarium. Underneath there was a folder full of drawings. She opened it and handed one to her sister. “That’s you at the mall.” In the drawing her sister was walking past the Orange Julius with her best friend Angel. They both carried bags from Spencer Gifts.

“I remember that day,” Diane said. “We ate at Long John Silver’s. Dad dropped us off.”

She picked up the pad of paper and crayon and set them on Liv’s desk and pulled out the chair.

“Can you do it again?” she’d asked.

“I can try,” Liv told her. She’d sat down and picked up the crayon. “It doesn’t always work.”

“Try it again,” Diane had said. “I want to see it again.”

This was the most interest Diane had shown in her in years. Liv had been anxious to please her and had tried again but nothing had happened. That night.

The next weekend had been New Year’s Eve. Their parents had gone to a party at their father’s office and their Grandma had been on the sofa watching Dick Clark. She’d ordered pizza and made popcorn and the three of them had watched the ball drop on Times Square at midnight. New Year’s Eve always seemed a little anti-climactic to Liv, but it was one of the few nights they were allowed to stay up late so she had never complained.

They'd kissed their grandmother goodnight and went up to their rooms. Just after climbing into bed, Liv's bedroom door had opened and Diane had come in wearing her pajamas.

"Are you sleepy?" Diane asked.

"Not really."

"Do you wanna try it again?" Diane whispered. "The drawing thing?"

Liv had gone to the desk and turned on the little lamp. She down and picked out a crayon. Red one, this time. Then she'd started to draw.

She hadn't thought that anything would happen but it did. The world went away, then came back and Diane had been shaking her again.

"It's the guy again!" She had been grinning. "It's that swimmer guy."

It was. He was driving a sporty looking car. Not very well, by the look of it. As they watched, the car swerved from one side of the road to the other. The guy pulled it back where it belonged, but then the girl in the seat next to him said something and he lost focus and the car swerved again.

Diane laughed. "That guy is seriously drunk," she said. "He's gonna get pulled over if he's not careful."

They watched him cruise the night dark streets. He breezed through one stoplight and nearly sideswiped a van. At the next he wasn't so lucky. He plowed right into a four door sedan and his car flipped end over end.

Liv had thought then, her stomach rolling, all four door cars look pretty much alike, don't they? She had felt suddenly sick and had wanted to look away but found she

couldn't. The dread she felt was enormous, like a wave about to crash over her head and drown her. It had all happened so fast...

"Oh my God!" Diane stage whispered. "Holy crap, did you see that!"

The swimmer's car was on its roof. As they watched, he crawled out of the window. He reached in the window on the other side of the car and tried to pull the girl out but wasn't having any luck. Then he stumbled to the car he'd hit and tried to open the door.

"No." Liv said.

Both sisters watched in horror as the young man pulled the door open. Inside the car, their father was slumped over the wheel. Their mother slowly turned her head to look at the man, her face covered in blood.

Their mother had lived for two days in intensive care before dying of her internal injuries. Their father had been pronounced dead on the scene by the paramedics. The drawing had stopped before they'd arrived. It had frozen on an image of the swimmer holding their mother's hand.

Diane had torn the drawing into pieces. She'd asked Liv if it was real. Liv had told her that she didn't know. They'd sat together in Liv's room until the phone had rung and Liv had gone to answer it. Then she'd woken up her grandmother so they could go to the hospital.

They'd gone to live with their grandmother. Diane had never asked her to draw anything, ever again.

On the day Diane had left for college, Liv had begun drawing a blonde haired guy with a goatee. She saw him in, sitting in classes, sitting in coffee shops with a journal in front of him. She saw him rape a co-ed. She saw him walk his dog. She saw him attack another girl. She watched him give a presentation in front of the class.

She hadn't been able to figure out why she kept drawing this guy. Then Diane had come home for Thanksgiving and brought her boyfriend, Gavin. Gavin had stood in their living room, smiling holding a pie that Diane said they'd baked together. Liv had walked in and nearly screamed when she'd seen him. It was him.

She'd asked Diane to come up to her room. She'd tried to show her the drawings of Gavin.

"I'm not looking at any of that... that *shit*," Diane had said. Liv had not gone down for dinner- she'd told her grandmother she had a bad stomachache; it was true- and Diane and Gavin had left right after pie.

One morning while they were eating breakfast and her grandmother was reading the paper, her grandmother had said, "Oh, my." She had dropped the paper on her plate of eggs and left the room. Liv had picked up the paper and read:

Campus Rapist Caught: Gavin Shepard, 22, was arrested on Friday for the sexual assault of a UCLA student. The student, 18, said that Shepard attacked her in her dorm room. Since the student filed a report with the police, 3 more victims have come forward to name Shepard as their attacker. Police now believe that Shepard may be responsible for as many as 8 instances of sexual assault on the UCLA campus in the last year...

She heard her grandmother on the phone in the living room, talking with Diane, asking her if she wanted to come home. Then she'd said, I'm just so glad he never attacked *you*, baby.

So glad he never hurt *you*.

He did hurt her, Grandma, Liv had wanted to say. He hurt her plenty.

Diane had come home that Christmas and hadn't spoken to Liv the entire time. When they were in a room together, Diane turned her back to her sister. When Liv tried to speak to her, she had just turned and walked out of the room. Liv had hoped that eventually Diane would forgive her for whatever wrong she felt she'd done. The only time Diane had ever spoken to her again was to say, "Get the hell away from me," and then "Don't ever call here again."

Liv hoped that Diane wouldn't hold what had happened between the two of them against her own daughter. Anna's gift was, in many ways, much more dangerous than Liv's. If Diane had a hard time with some moving pictures, Liv thought, just wait until she understands what Anna can do...