

Guardian

Flash Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

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*Between every parent and child there is a certain magic
which the fear of an innocent can call upon to prevail in the darkest of situations.*

Lieutenant Roberts, in his late 30s, a senior Detective with the same police department where he started work after college, was all too used to getting calls in the middle of the night. It had been one of his earliest realizations that he would grow up and live his life in the state of his parents and grandparents. This place was his home and these people, all of them, were family, whatever time of day or night they needed his help.

Having been asleep when they called him, by the time he arrived before dawn that early summer morning he had to pull up a few houses down from the crime scene and walk towards the police cars and ambulances that were in front of the Colby's two story colonial. It was a nice neighborhood, one of the newer subdivisions in this county that couldn't resist the lure of growth.

Rushing up to where two ME Assistants were rolling a body bag down the driveway, he saw Detective Sclorowsky look up from the notes she was making to greet him. Recognizing the look of concern on Roberts' face, she didn't waste any time bringing him up to date.

"That's one of the two that broke in," she started, gesturing over her shoulder toward the open rear doors of the ambulance nearest to where they were standing. "The other one, also dead, will be out in a minute."

"And the..."

"No one in the family was badly hurt. Just the mother and her 5 year old daughter were at home. The father's out of state on business, but on his way back now. He should be here in a few hours."

"Just the mother and a 5 year old took out both of them?"

"Not exactly. ...Let's go inside. You'll need to hear this for yourself."

The house, still busy with police officers and forensic specialists, was good sized, but not huge, comfortably furnished with the clutter and stuff of life here and there where you'd expect it to be. Waiting for them inside, the mother sat nervously on a love seat in their family room, her daughter next to her, her feet stopping a few inches short of the rug that covered the center of their hardwood floor.

Detective Sclorowsky pulled up the leather chair from the other side of the room, but Roberts wanted to be closer and sat on the refinished wooden trunk they used as their coffee table. Both women seemed remarkably calm, the events of the night not having fully affected them yet. That would happen soon enough which is why he had to talk to them now before they became any more distracted by the reality of what had happened. With some people, you have to wait a day or two. Others were best when you talked to them right away. Over the years, he'd learned to tell the difference.

“Hi, Mrs. Colby. My name is Jacob Roberts. ..and you,” he smiled ever so slightly, turning a bit to his right, “must be Emma.”

The little girl nodded her head up and down, but said nothing.

“Mrs. Colby, I know you've been through all this before with Detective Sclorowsky but, if you could, tell me the basics of what happened.”

An attractive, slender brunette with wavy shoulder length hair, she looked remarkable given what she'd just been through. Outward appearances aside, it seemed for a moment that she wouldn't be able to speak. A large bruise was coming to the surface of the left side of her face where an EMT had clamped and bandaged a cut. “Mrs. Colby?”

“Emma and I have trouble getting to bed sometimes when Michael's out of town, so we stayed up late, watched a movie together and fell asleep on the couch,” looking up and over at the overstuffed three cushion sofa against the wall behind him. “I don't know when exactly, but I heard noises coming from the basement. It's a walkout and I was worried someone might be someone trying to break in. Sometimes I hear sounds from the woods, deer that come up to eat the bushes around the deck, a fox sometimes, but this was different.”

Her voice was steady and deliberate as if she had to concentrate to get the words out. “Did Emma wake up, too?” he asked, thinking it best to interrupt her now and then for her to hear the sound of his voice.

“No. ..No. I...”

“Mommy woke me up.”

Impressed that the little girl was taking the initiative while her mother was clearly struggling, he turned to encourage her. “What did she say, Emma?”

“She told me the truth. That's what we're supposed to do in an e-merg-en-cy.” It was a longer word she had trouble pronouncing.”

“What exactly did she tell you?”

“Mommy said it was the middle of the night, and that there was noise in the basement she was worried about.” Her confidence building, the little girl was relaxed now and anxious to help. “She told me to sneak upstairs, very very quietly, and hide in my bedroom closet while she called 911.”

“Is that what you did?”

“Of course,” Emma responded, almost as if she was wondering if he’d been paying attention.

“And, Mrs. Colby,” Sclorowsky wanted her to include a detail Roberts wouldn’t have known to ask about, “you didn’t call 911, at least not right away, did you?”

“No. I keep my phone on a...,” she paused to catch her breath, “on a charging stand on the counter there,” she explained, pointing toward the kitchen at the other end of the room, past the table where they ate most of their meals. “I came around there, past the refrigerator, but never made it.”

“...The first one of them came up the basement stairs,” through the doorway just outside the kitchen, “and grabbed me from behind, bringing his arm diagonally across my chest, like this.” She used her right arm to demonstrate. “I could hardly breathe. ..The second man was right behind him, but went off somewhere, while the first one pulled me down the stairs, back into the basement. I tried holding on the molding around the door and then the banister, but I couldn’t get on my feet – and then I thought, maybe when I got downstairs, maybe I’d be able to fight him off. It’s my house. There’re tools in the shop if I could just...” She was starting to have trouble.

“Keep going, Mrs. Colby. You’re doing great.”

“And then he threw me over... It’s open, the stairs are open at the bottom. He threw me over onto the floor. I must have hit my head on something. I’m not sure. It was dark.”

“And you called 911 when you regained consciousness?”

“Yes. When I woke up, it couldn’t have been too long that I was out, I remember hearing screaming and crashing sounds on my way up the basement stairs. That’s when I picked up my cell phone and called the police.”

“Emma?”

“Yes, Detective?” Her formality would have been cute under different circumstances.

“What was happening upstairs, Emma, while your mother was in the basement? What happened in your room?”

She paused for a moment, as if wondering if she should tell him.

“Go ahead honey,” her mother prompted her, reaching out to touch Emma’s hand that was pressing on the cushion between them. “Tell Detective Roberts what you told me.”

Looking up at the Detective, she answered his question with certainty. “Guardian protected me. The two men came into my room, and Guardian protected me just like Daddy said he would.”

“Just Guardian and the two men?”

“Uh huh. ..It hardly seems fair, does it? To the men, I mean.”

Leaning back to distance himself from the little girl, Detective Roberts needed to see her room. “Let’s take a break for a couple minutes. I just want to run upstairs and take a look at your room. Will you wait here for me?”

Once again, Emma nodded her agreement.

“Detective,” he said turning toward Sclorowsky, and the two of them stood up and left the room, on their way down the short hallway toward the stairs and to Emma’s room. “What’s Guardian,” he asked her with quiet impatience when they were out of the room, “the family dog?”

“No. It’s, uh, not a dog.”

“So what’s she talking about?”

“Com’on,” Sclorowsky started up the stairs first, “It’s the kind of thing you need to see to believe. The ME’s pulled the bodies, but you’ll get the point.”

Pushing open the door with her left arm, she moved to the corner of the bed, turning back to Roberts whose eyes began moving slowly from point to point in the mayhem he saw. The room was trashed. There was blood all over the place.

“The preliminary conclusion of the lead tech was that both men were ‘torn to shreds,’ his words, by... by something with very sharp teeth and claws, something powerful, strong enough to bounce a adult male off a wall,” she pointed to a large section of crushed sheetrock next to the dresser, “ and to snap major bones. All the wounds were rough. No precision cuts or holes that he could see. As far as he could tell, there were no manmade weapons involved. Ralph said, if we’d found the bodies in the woods, he be sure it was a wild animal attack.”

Roberts walked into the room, but not far, being careful where he stepped. The walk-in closet was to his right. “Are you absolutely sure there’s no way the kid and her mother did this?”

“No way. The mother was clearly beaten. There’s some blood on the wall across from the bottom of the basement stairs. I think she’s telling the truth. Besides, she’s what, 5’ 4”, maybe 120 pounds?”

“And the father? What about the father?”

“Asleep in a different time zone when all this happened.” Seeing her colleague wasn’t buying it, Sclorowsky turned back a few pages in the spiral notepad she was carrying to go over what Emma had told her when the two of them had talked earlier. “The kid is hiding in her closet, under a high bottom shelf, behind some plastic storage boxes. It’s not a great hiding place, but she feels good about it and can see the door. The closet light was off and the door, shut. Smart girl, she purposely left her bedroom door open so it wouldn’t seem so much like someone might be hiding there. ..There’s no lock on it anyway.”

That got Roberts’ attention, turning his head toward Sclorowsky, away from the gore of the room and its stark contradiction to the walk-in-the-park kids’ wall paper and phosphorescent plastic stars hanging from the ceiling. “She was thinking?” it seemed hard to believe. “With all hell

breaking lose around her,” there was no missing the skepticism in the tone of his voice, “she was thinking that clearly? She wasn’t scared out of her mind? Paralyzed with fear?”

Sclorowsky ignored him and continued going through her notes... “So the two men come into the room, one checking under the bed, rummaging through the dresser, who knows, while the other one opens the closet door, looks down and stares right at her. The kid, knowing he sees her, shouts “Daaaaddddy!!!” at the top of her lungs, loud enough for her mother to hear her all the way down in the basement. It could have been what woke her up. It’s so loud, both men stop whatever they’re doing. Nothing happens. Zip. Emma says it was quiet for a couple of seconds and then the one looking in the closet door smiles at her, ‘eyes bulging,’ she told me. Looks left, looks right and says to her ‘in a really creepy voice,’ ‘So you were expecting what to happen?’ laughs and then starts to open the door the rest of the way to come and get her. ...At which time she says it again, but this time not so loud and with a lot less confidence, ‘Daddy?’”

“All of a sudden, something dark ‘whooshes,’ according to Emma, around from behind the door, from inside the room, ripping into the intruder’s neck – which pretty much wiped the smile off his face. The man reaches up with both hands toward the arm that’s got him just as he’s yanked back, right off his feet, the closet door slamming behind him. There’s tremendous ruckus, noise of furniture crashing and adult men screaming – that even a neighbor heard. It’s suddenly quiet, so the kid gets up, pokes her face out the closet door, steps over the bodies and runs downstairs only to meet her mother on the way up. From what I can tell, the whole struggle couldn’t have taken more than a couple of minutes while the mother was calling 911.”

“And the Medical Examiner?”

“I’m telling you, the mother and the girl couldn’t have done this.”

“So what, they have a pet bear?” Robert’s asked facetiously, searching for a reasonable explanation. “A large housecat,” he tried joking, but the room wouldn’t allow it.

“No. They don’t have any pets. The daughter insists that Guardian did it. He was a gift from her father before he went out of town, to protect her. They just moved here this summer in time to get settled and ready for the school year. The kid didn’t want to move...”

“They never do.”

“...and has been withdrawn, so the father bought her the bear to make her feel safe.”

“I thought you said they didn’t have any pets? Besides, what kind of father buys his kid a wild animal?”

“No pets. Guardian,” she explained, moving away from the end of the bed from where she had blocking Robert’s view of the headboard, is the kid’s stuffed California brown bear.”

And there he sat, as true-to-life as stuffed bears get, about the size of a new bear cub, his faux fur perfect for hugging. Sitting up between two pillows, his plastic eyes appeared to be staring right at them, the expression on his face so innocent and friendly – except, of course, for the blood soaked torn piece of one of the intruder’s t-shirt hanging out the corner of his mouth.

“This is, what, some kind of elaborate prank?” Roberts was hoping it was.

Sclorowsky looked back at him, pursing her lips, shaking her head slowly left to right. “And we’ve got two bodies to prove it. ...So tell me,” she asked, walking behind him going down the stairs, “just how do you want me to write this up?”

“Home Invasion Stifled,” so the local paper ran the story, “Intruders Killed By Unidentified Party.” There was even speculation that the killer was a third intruder upset that the other two we’re planning to harm the family. They could speculate all they wanted, Emma would always know what really happened. And the bear would follow her to college and to her apartment after graduation years later – fair warning to petty thieves and worse who might be so foolish as to pay her a visit.

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