

The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.
A Novel by Gary William Murning

Chapter One.

“Are you planning on staying in there all day?”

I looked up at her. Ashley Moore, my beautiful if sometimes rather apathetic wife—our sleepy two-year-old daughter, Nadine Verity, perched on her hip, head on her mother’s comfortable chest. From my hole in the ground, at least four feet down, and with the sun behind her, she was an impressive figure. Actually a little on the short side, and with a carelessness about her that had once been attractive, my perspective imbued her with an elegance that quickly made me forget my irritation at being interrupted.

“You know me, love,” I said. “I don’t plan.” This wasn’t entirely true, and she knew it. I could actually be methodical to the point of fastidiousness when the mood took me—and whilst I may have rarely planned in any overt way, I was nevertheless inclined to think well ahead. With my work, if nothing else.

She gave me her best I’m-trying-to-be-patient look and lifted Nadine higher on her hip. “Yeah, whatever,” she said. “But are you staying in there all day, or what? In case you’ve forgotten, a certain little lady is having a few friends round later and... well, let’s just say I’d rather have that living grave of yours filled in before they come, if you don’t mind.”

We’d already had this conversation and she knew very well that filling in my hole at this early stage in the game was simply out of the question.

The day was warm—promising intense heat and high humidity—but it was cool where I was, and, briefly, I took solace in that. Closing my eyes and breathing in the damp, fibrous scent of soil and clay—I tried to remember what it was like to be

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autonomous, to never be answerable to anyone, alone, selfish and focused entirely on my own goals and obsessions. That had been the post-University bachelor me. An alien figure, it now seemed. And however annoying Ashley's nagging could be, I found I didn't truthfully envy that shadowy half-man.

And so, very calmly, I reminded myself just how lucky I was and said for the umpteenth time, "Darling, you know I can't fill the hole in. I haven't fixed the problem, yet."

Nadine had picked up on the tone of exaggerated patience in our voices. She glanced warily from her mother to me and back again. The fleeting suspicion I saw in my daughter's indigo eyes made me feel like a stranger. I wanted to smile at her, tell her that everything was going to be all right—but I just wouldn't have been convincing.

"There isn't a problem, though, *darling*," Ashley insisted. "So the lawn gets a little water-logged now and then. It's a lawn. It's not as if our foundations are filling with water or anything."

"I want the lawn to be nice."

"Because your dad always kept it nice. I know. And that's lovely, it really is, but how is a bloody big hole going to help?"

I wasn't entirely sure, but I couldn't tell her that. The hole had been an impulse—something I'd felt I'd needed as much for the hole itself as for the solution I'd hoped it might provide. Some men collect beer mats or pornography, but I had discovered a love of holes—this hole in particular—and protecting my latest obsession required a little creative reasoning.

"Clay," I said, wondering if I'd perhaps inadvertently hit on something. "It... it holds water, you see. And there's an awful lot of it down here, which means that

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because this section is lower than the lawn it's not allowing the run-off to... well, run off."

I thought I saw a brief flicker of admiration pass behind her squinted eyes—but it was difficult to be sure of anything with the sun where it was and my neck beginning to ache from looking up at her.

"The clay holds it?"

"Indeed. The clay holds it."

"Cway," Nadine chuckled. I reached up and tickled her bare foot and she reflexively pulled it away, laughter hiccupping from her as she buried her face in Ashley's chest.

"I see," Ashley said, refusing to be distracted. "So what if there's clay under the lawn? You gonna dig that up, too?"

"I won't get it filled in today," I said sullenly. "But I'll make it safe."

After I'd piled bags of sand and cement from the garage around the hole, and laid some old fence panels over it, I went inside to get washed up and changed.

Nadine was playing with a spatula on the kitchen floor whilst Ashley watched the portable television on the worktop in the corner as she ostensibly made egg sandwiches for the "party". I stepped over Nadine and soaped my hands meticulously in the sink—scrubbing beneath my nails and ensuring that not a speck of dirt remained.

The woman on the telly said, "But Charley, I'm ready to forgive you", and Ashley snorted derisively.

"Anything interesting?" I asked, drying my hands on an inferior brand of kitchen roll.

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“Just the usual brain-dead twonks subjecting themselves to superficial analysis,” she said. “You’re not wearing that T-shirt, I hope.”

“I was planning on the white shirt with blue stripe.”

“I thought you didn’t plan.” She knew I was still a little pissed off about the clay, so her tone was light and conciliatory. I was happy to meet her halfway. After all, whatever had been said, I still had my hole—if only for the time being. That had to be a kind of victory.

Grabbing her around the waist, I pulled her close—some mashed up egg flicking from the spoon she was holding and landing on the carpet tile nearest Nadine. Frowning at it and sniffing the air thoughtfully, Nadine swatted it like a fly with the spatula—gleefully grinding it into the carpet.

“You’re a right smart arse today,” I whispered in Ashley’s ear. “But you knew that already, right?”

It had been difficult for Ashley and I recently, and we were both quick to acknowledge that. I couldn’t recall the last time a day had passed without there being friction and badly concealed impatience between us—without either one or both of us finding something in the other to irritate and distract. For me, it was usually a mark of frustration—with Ashley and her couldn’t-care-less attitude, with my work, with the waterlogged hole, it didn’t matter, the end result was the same. For Ashley, I suspected her moods were more complex than that. She was a deep creature who had too much time to think, even with a two-year-old to run around after, and I couldn’t help feeling that all it would take for her to find me a little less irritating would be for her to work a little harder around the house, get a part-time job, even.

Today, however, it felt different. As I pulled her to me, trying to ignore the fart-like stink of the hard-boiled eggs, I looked into her eyes—almost as rich a shade

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of blue as Nadine's—and saw something of what we had once been reflected there. The energy, the sublime sense that anything was possible—the overwhelming attraction and the heartfelt conviction that this brought with it. Life was a fairytale in which evil things happened, but good always prevailed. Love was real and enduring, something to be counted upon and which would always inspire the correct choices.

“One of the many things you love me for,” Ashley whispered huskily. “Don't fight it.” She put her free hand in the back pocket of my jeans and pressed me firmly to her—kissing me on the mouth, her breath tasting of sour milk and tea. I felt her warmth—a supremely personal thing—and thought of the way the perspiration dribbled between her breasts on the really hot days.

“We have company,” I said—reminding her that our inquisitive daughter was sitting on the floor not two feet away, quickly losing interest in the squashed piece of hardboiled egg.

“She'll be ok here for a short while. She can finish making the sandwiches.” Ashley grinned, her perfect teeth somehow intimidating. She was joking, of course, but I couldn't help feeling that sometimes—*just sometimes*—she would gladly leave Nadine all alone, or dump her with a relative stranger, if it meant that she could get a little instant gratification of one kind or another.

“She'd eat all the bread and mash the egg into the carpet,” I said. “Nice thought, though. Maybe we can talk your mam into having her over the weekend—have a couple of evenings to ourselves.”

Ashley pulled away and went back to making the sandwiches, shrugging. “Not exactly spontaneous, though, is it?” she asked.

“Spontaneity is what got us Nadine in the first place. Now that she's here, however, well, you know. We are parents first and foremost.”

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“Are we?”

“Yes.”

“First and foremost?”

“I like to think so.”

Looking at me over her shoulder, she was about to say more. Her breathing was slow and measured, her eyes fixed and unwavering. Someone on the telly was shouting about how his bitch should show him some respect, man, and I couldn't help feeling that that was the shape of things to come—for us all. Fame at any price, everyone the celebrity, the media validating antisocial behaviour, making it perversely respectable to wallow in the mire as long as you remembered not to talk into camera. Ashley enjoyed this daytime mish-mash of dirt and dysfunctionals, whatever she said to the contrary, and as she stared at me, her mouth open with a partially formed response, I half expected her to spout some suitably inane chat-psychology crap about mothers not losing themselves, how they needed “space” and an “identity” separate from the child. Thankfully, she was not quite so crass.

“Go get changed,” she told me. “And take a shower first. You stink.”

I stopped by my study on the way to the bathroom—just to see if the notes for my next novel had finished writing themselves while I'd been down in my hole. Moving my mouse to take the screensaver off (a slideshow of Nadine's baby photos with a generous sprinkling of saucy shots of Ashley I'd taken with my new digital camera when we'd both been rather drunk), I read through what I had written earlier that morning and wondered where in the hell this was going.

Examine the possibilities of the Sorrow Street Asylum, I read. Look in particular at ways in which it can be connected to the Cult of Elvis and, specifically,

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the Ma Boy, Ma Boy story.

There were any number of problems that would need to be solved if this novel were to be viable—but I instinctively knew that that could only be achieved during the writing. It was largely true that, as I had said to Ashley, I didn't plan. Beyond a little preliminary research and a few rough ideas as a jumping off point, I preferred to solve the problems along the way—knowing from past experience that a plan in excess of a thousand words would kill the project stone dead for me. But it was a hair-raising way to work, and now I had my hole to occupy me, I couldn't see myself starting it for a week or two yet.

At the window, I peeled off my T-shirt and looked down onto the back garden. It had been my father's pride and joy before the car crash that had killed him and my mother five years before. It had always had a certain order that I couldn't quite fathom in Dad's day—a quintessential pattern that existed within the deceptively apparent chaos. Plants and flowers I couldn't name sprouted randomly, but never clashed or looked inappropriate. Rows of vegetables filled one corner—so crisp and succulent I now felt nostalgic for them. And the lawn... his lawn. It had possessed a certain simplicity, and yet had an obvious quality about it that came from hours of care and dedication. Precisely mowed contrasting rows of light and shade, consistent length no matter the time of year and never so much as a hint of a yellow patch—these were the things in which my father prided himself, and this pride had carried itself over into the rest of his life. An unassuming, gentle man, he had moved through life with generosity and grace. And all this had been typified by his little patch of garden—bought with the house from the council when I had been no more than a babe in arms, an “investment”, Dad had always said, though I'd always suspected that money had been the last thing on his mind.

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Now, looking down onto the lawn, something occurred to me. I sat down at my desk and stared at the skirting board, mulling over the anomaly as the screensaver kicked in again. Nothing had changed since Dad's day—that was the first thing that occurred to me. The house was where it had always been, the garden was where it had always been—and the boundary fence hadn't been messed about with, as far as I could tell. So why the sudden drainage problem? For as long as I could remember, the lawn had been the epitome of perfection and however lovingly Dad may have tended it, I doubted that that would have been possible if he'd had to contend with the problems I now found myself facing. Could drainage problems develop spontaneously, I wondered. It didn't seem likely, but what other explanation was there?

I pondered this briefly as I took my shower, but quickly dismissed it as “just one of those things”.

I wasn't entirely sure what I was supposed to do in a room full of e-number high toddlers, so when I felt I'd made my toilet last as long as was reasonable and finally went downstairs, I was rather relieved to see that only a couple had thus far arrived.

Maggie, an old school friend of Ashley's had brought “Wee Mark”—a bruiser of a kid who had a habit of pinballing through the house with a maniacal air about him. He was trouble but I couldn't help but admire his rough-and-tumble resilience. Beside him, Nadine's other little friend, Veronique looked even more sickly than usual—sitting in the corner of the settee, hugging her knees and staring around the room with the biggest, brownest eyes I'd ever seen.

Nadine guarded her latest Action Man suspiciously, holding him tightly by the head whilst Molly, Veronique's mum, talked to her about Jesus.

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Ashley rolled her eyes at me from the kitchen doorway and said, “Looks like there’s a bug doing the rounds. The rest of them are either busy soiling themselves or trying keep out of its way.”

“A right stinker, by all accounts,” Maggie said. “If you’ll pardon the pun.” She giggled—and judging by the flush of her cheeks I guessed Ashley had already introduced her to the Vodka bottle (not that they weren’t already well acquainted).

“Projectile vomiting, the lot,” Ashley said—with rather too much enthusiasm for my liking. “Maybe getting Mum to have Nadine this weekend wasn’t such a bad idea after all.”

“Do you feel that’s wise?” Molly—all slacks and sensible shoes—stood from her crouching position and her knees popped. Apparently her tales of crucifixion and resurrection when all done with for now.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Ashley said.

“Oh, no reason,” Molly replied—meaning she could think of plenty, at least half of them with a perfectly workable Jesus reference.

“Spit it out, Moll,” Ashley said impatiently as Wee Mark shuffled off the edge of the settee and tried to stare down the blank television screen. It occurred to me that maybe I could have made my shower last a little longer—until the hot water had ran out, perhaps.

“It’s just that it strikes me as a little inconsiderate,” Molly said artlessly. “Your parents aren’t spring chickens anymore and to be possibly subjecting them to diarrhoea and projectile vomiting doesn’t seem all that Christian to me, that’s all.”

“You’re forgetting, I’m not a Christian,” Ashley said. Maggie chuckled and helped herself to another vodka.

I pushed past Ashley into the kitchen, and then went out into the back garden

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—deciding that the best course of action was to just leave them to it. Ashley was more than a match for Molly’s promise of perfection in Christ. She’d read enough to be able to pull Molly’s favoured crutch right the fuck out from under her, if she so wished, but I didn’t particularly want to witness it. Ten years ago, I would have ridiculed Molly for her belief—but no more. As ridiculous as it all so clearly was, a part of me envied her that conviction. No doubt, no questions that couldn’t be answered with “the Lord moves in mysterious ways”—there was a kind of attraction in that.

I sat on the low wall beside the rockery, looking at Dad’s lawn and sipping on a Stella I’d got from the garage. After a few minutes pondering afresh the conundrum of the waterlogged lawn, Maggie came out to join me—bringing her glass and the vodka bottle along with her.

Maggie and I had always got on. Conversation was easy, in spite of the fact that we’d once spent an entire weekend fucking each other’s brains out at her mother’s cottage in Wales—just weeks before my marriage to Ash. In retrospect, we both knew it had been foolish and relatively meaningless—but it was something we had shared, and I could only ever look on Maggie with fondness.

“Ashley’s on about the fundamental differences between the biblical Jesus and the historic Jesus again,” she said.

“Going to be a long afternoon, then.”

“Looks that way.”

We sat like that for a short while, neither of us saying anything—sipping at our drinks and staring at the garden. The sun was hot on the side of my face and I knew that if I didn’t move soon I’d end up looking like a crude Bowie alter ego. I was tempted to go inside to see how it was going between Ash and Molly, but I got the

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strangest feeling there was something Maggie wanted to say to me. I waited a while longer and just when I'd finally managed to convince myself that I'd been mistaken, she said:

“Something weird’s been happening to me, Sonny.”

As a conversational opener, it wasn’t all that unusual or compelling—especially coming from Maggie. She was the kind of person who attracted weirdness the way some folk attract junk mail, and I maybe took a little too much pleasure in telling her this.

“This is different,” she insisted. “I’m worried, Sonny. Worried for me and worried for Mark.... Since Jim... you know... since what happened I’m all that Mark’s got, and I don’t like what’s happening. It threatens me and by default it threatens Wee Mark. That’s just... I can’t live with that.”

Putting my bottle on the pavement by my feet, I twisted to get a better look at her. Since Jim’s death from cancer a little over a year ago, time had started to take its toll on her. Her dark hair was now streaked through with grey and her mouth seemed shrunken—the lines radiating from her lips growing perceptibly deeper. There was a degree of sorrow behind her lacklustre eyes, but more than anything I thought I saw fear there—fear of being alone, of having to face whatever it was that was going on in her life without having someone to help, someone to say the right thing and watch out for her and Wee Mark. I didn’t know if I was the right man for the job, but I did know that Ashley would be deeply disappointed in me if I didn’t at least try.

And so, without giving myself time to reconsider, I said, “What is it, Mags?”

She took her time—that’s what I noticed more than anything. It was so unlike her. Normally impulsive and a little dippy, she sat beside me and very methodically worked through the, it had to be said, fairly mundane facts.

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“It started about three weeks ago,” she said, ever so calmly—the sweet, onion smell of the vodka carrying to me on her breath. “I thought it was just my imagination to begin with. You know what it’s like when you live alone. Your mind works overtime. So I didn’t pay much attention to it. I tried to forget all about it, get on with my life, but I still couldn’t escape the overwhelming feeling that I was being watched. I couldn’t see anyone, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t see me...” It was starting to get away from her. She paused and closed her eyes, taking a delicate sip of her vodka—a sigh escaping her before she continued. “Then the phone calls started. From a withheld number. Silence, at first, then... he watches me all the time, Sonny. That’s what the phone calls are all about. He itemises my day—telling me what I’ve done, where I’ve been. It’s... I can’t see him, but it’s as if he’s with me all the time, inside my head. I swear he even knows when I masturbate.” She seemed to feel that this last was more than I needed to hear, so moved on quickly. “The police weren’t much help. They suggested I keep a journal, change my number and get back to them when I had an idea who it might be.”

“Change your name to Catherine Zeta Jones,” I suggested. “That might help.”

She smiled sadly. “If only it were that simple. I’m scared, Sonny. I mentioned it to Ash and she said I should have a word with you. She said you’d know what to do.”

It was nice to know my wife had such confidence in me. However, the truth was, I didn’t have a clue where to start, or what to suggest, even. I was a poorly paid novelist and, yes, I had a few people I could call upon when the chips were down—but this certainly wasn’t something I was in any way prepared for.

“She said that?”

“I’m afraid so.” Taking my hand, she gave it a firm squeeze. I remembered

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what it had been like to be with her. Hurried, frenetic—nothing even remotely resembling love. Purely physical and very wet. It was all so far removed from who we now were, and I suddenly wished it could have been different. I wished that my parents and Jim were still alive, I wished that I could have loved Maggie *and* Ashley, I wished that the world were not such a complicated place with its death and betrayal, its confusing blend of love and need.

“Don’t look so worried,” Maggie said, squeezing my hand again. “I know it’s a tough one. I just thought... well, three heads are better than one, right?”

Something occurred to me. It wasn’t exactly the most impressive thought I’d ever had in my life, but at least it was somewhere to start (and something that would show Maggie and Ash that I wasn’t about to dismiss this out of hand). “You said he always knows where you’ve been, right?” I said.

“That’s right, yes.”

“Detailed and consistent?”

“Very.”

“But you’ve never seen him.”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

I got quickly to my feet—kicking over the bottle of Stella in the process—and marched resolutely along the path at the side of the house and round to the front. I heard Maggie hurrying along behind me, breathy and concerned as her flip-flops shuffled and slapped. I smelt honeysuckle and the faintly ripe odour of the hedge that marked the front boundary of our property. If I’d had time to think about it I might have done it differently, but as it was I marched on through the gate and out onto Sorrow Street.

I don’t know what I’d expected to see—some guy in dark glasses, perhaps,

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suspiciously lurking by the streetlamp, smoking and blowing rings into the air as he nonchalantly considered his next move. Maybe this was the moment he had been building up to all along; confrontation, the ultimate explanation. Weeks or months of steady surveillance followed by a formal introduction and... and what?

The street was deserted, of course—unusual in itself, but doubly so given that it was the height of summer and the kids were off school. I stepped out into the middle of the road, Maggie panting behind me as she rested against the gatepost, and turned full circle—scanning the full length of the road, looking at windows and cars parked in driveways, waiting for my eyes to lock with those of a stranger or, perhaps, someone I actually knew. A Tarantino moment would follow. Or perhaps not.

“Sonny?” Maggie said. “What?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I just thought it seemed logical.” I shrugged. “It made sense to me,” I added as I walked back towards her. “He knows everywhere you’ve been so... guess it isn’t that simple.”

“And what if it had been?”

“Eh?”

“What if it had been that simple? What would you have done?”

Leaning against the other gatepost, I considered this for a moment—feeling my heart rate slow and the perspiration itch in the pits of my arms. The sour taste of beer in my mouth, I suddenly didn’t want to think about the things that might have happened. I was no hero. Granted, I was no backless bastard who would run when he should have been making a stand—but I was a man who spent most of his time sitting before a computer screen letting my characters do all the fighting, and no matter how many holes I dug, I was never going to be much of a match for anyone other than the wettest leaf of limp lettuce.

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“Why have a dog and bark yourself,” I said. “I’d have given Ash a shout.”

“You don’t mean that,” Maggie said, trying not to smile.

“Don’t I?... No, you’re right—I don’t. She’ll still be too busy sorting Molly out, anyway.”

Feeling rather foolish, I returned to the back garden with Maggie—still considering her problem, but determined to do my best to find a more rational approach to a solution. I heard brittle, childish laughter as we walked along the path, and I felt my heart lift. Foolishness didn’t matter quite so much when you had the unconditional love of a son or daughter to fall back on, and as we rounded the corner into the back garden, I imagined myself lifting Nadine high into the air, spinning her around, covering her with kisses and blowing wet raspberries against her neck as she giggled with near-hysterical delight. Everything made sense because of her. She was the explanation and the cause and at unexpected moments like these I realised just how deeply connected we were.

When Maggie gasped, it took me a second or two to see what the problem was. She stopped and I almost walked into the back of her. Somewhere—far off, it seemed—I heard the word “Jesus” and understood that Ash and Molly were still arguing in the house, each as deeply entrenched and oblivious as the other. Maggie shuddered and reached behind her, blindly groping for my hand and pulling me level with her so that there could be no doubt that I was seeing what she was seeing.

It seemed that Wee Mark and Nadine had escaped the suffocating confines of the house and were now playing quite happily in the back garden—walking purposefully back and forth across the fence panels I’d placed over my hole, one of the sand bags split where they had apparently clambered over it. The panels bounced

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frighteningly as Wee Mark took his turn, singing the words “Billy Goat Gruff” over and over. The wood made a protracted creak and, as I ran forward to grab Mark whilst Maggie pulled Nadine away from the hole, I imagined it splintering—Mark’s rough and tumble resilience finally getting the better of him.

Blessedly, I got to him before anything nasty could happen. Lifting him and holding him to me, Maggie doing the same with Nadine, we stood like that for what seemed like a very long time—each holding the other’s child, staring at each other, neither wanting to acknowledge the things that might have been.

“We thought you and Maggie were out there!” Ashley insisted.

I held Nadine now, Maggie keeping a firm grip on a struggling Mark. Nadine smelt hot and sweet, and it was hard not to find this soothing. Veronique hadn’t moved from her place on the settee and she looked up at us as if this were all the confirmation she needed that we adults were indeed an entirely different and extremely peculiar species. Nadine blew a saliva bubble and it popped against my cheek.

“And you didn’t think to check first before you let them go wandering off?” I knew I was on shaky ground, but as, oblivious as Wee Mark to the dangers of the troll beneath his “bridge”, I just kept right on going. “Jesus Christ, the two of you sit on your arses in here arguing about some bloke who’s been dead for nigh on two thousand years and—“

“Jesus was not just some bloke,” Molly said indignantly. “He was the Son of God and if anyone’s to thank for Wee Mark and Nadine being safe, it’s him and I really don’t think you should—“

“Shut up, Molly,” Maggie said.

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“Ut up, Molly,” Nadine whispered.

I could see that Ashley was approaching critical. Her jaw was clenched and the vein in the centre of her forehead was standing out. She looked as irritated by Molly as the rest of us—but I knew that when her fists finally released themselves, fingers uncurling like the petals of some carnivorous plant, I would be the one at whom her wrath would be directed.

I could see that this could very easily get nasty. Ashley wasn't entirely in the wrong, here, maybe not even in the wrong at all—but I wanted to punish her for all the other times she'd been complacent, let her know that there was only so much I was willing to put up with. I remembered just the week before, coming downstairs in the middle of the afternoon after a long morning's work only to find Ashley asleep on the sofa whilst Nadine played quietly by herself. All the doors through to the back garden had been open—to freshen the stifling air and no doubt let a few flies and bees in—and I remembered controlling my anger, reasoning my way through it before waking Ash. I made excuses, pointed out to myself that Nadine wasn't the type for wandering far from her mother's side but, ultimately, it had been an irresponsible thing to do, and I'd wondered how many times it had happened before. In the end I had woken her gently and given her the benefit of the doubt (not in the mood for an argument), accepting her explanation and apology, but now that little episode came back with all its unclaimed force and I suddenly felt that Ashley and I were alone, that we were the only two people on the fragile face of the planet, and the urge to tell her what I thought of her was too strong to resist.

Very calmly, I took a step towards her—glancing down and noticing that her fists were still clenched. Wee Mark grumbled and whined, trying to escape his mother's grip, but even that faded to the distance. My ears filled with a whirling,

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swooshing liquid sound and I heard my own voice as if I were under water.

“Our daughter is not a toy to be discarded once you’ve tired of her,” I said, a little menacingly. “She isn’t just another of your whims—she’s a precious little thing that needs looking after.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you forget it far too often.”

I’d thought she would fight. Her hands remained clenched and she blinked rapidly, flushing with colour—her cheekbones becoming more prominent as emotion claimed her.

“I could never forget it,” she told me, taking Nadine from me and kissing the confused child on the forehead. “I would never *want* to forget it. But sometimes it’s hard. Harder than you’ll ever know, Sonny. It’s ok for you. You hide in your office or down your hole most of the day—and you think you’re justified in doing that. And you are. To a point. But me... I get tired. I get scared and lonely.”

“The burden of motherhood,” Molly said.

“Shut up, Molly,” Maggie and I said in unison.

“I’m only—“ she started, but Ashley cut her off.

“I’ll do anything to keep her safe,” she said. “You know that, Sonny.”

The danger had passed. I reached out and brushed my fingers over Ashley’s cheek—seeing just how unfair I had been. Veronique watched us, her wet mouth hanging open, and I said, “Yes, I do.”