

## A Naptime on Elm Street.

(A Novelization of the Oskosh award winning ABDL Horror Film of the Same Name)

Deep in the bowels of the Daycare, down in the basement where Little Ones dared not come and play for fear of the dark and ghosts; two hands worked slowly and methodically. Mustn't forget a thing. Not a thing. It would be time soon.

The old carpet bag, green and red stripes faded and dingy looking from years of disuse was popped open. Empty inside; just like the person opening it. Soon though, both would be filled; first, the bag.

Spare clothes came first; onesies mostly. Onesies were an outfit all by themselves, no matching or coordination required. Keep the Little Ones warm and cover what little modesty they had. They went in the bottom precisely because if she did her job well enough, she wouldn't need a spare change of clothes. Little Ones did love to make a mess though...

Better safe than sorry.

Next came toys and trinkets. Nothing major. Nothing elaborate. Nothing that lit up or required batteries. None of the hulking plastic monstrosities that were called play sets that littered the Daycare's basement.

Rattles. Plastic Keys. Teething Rings. Pacifiers, too. Those all went in. Cute little shiny things...or things that had once been shiny...to keep a Little One occupied for a precious few minutes.

A bottle was wedged in for good measure. Cap on. No spills allowed.

Next came the wipes. Practically a wonder tool wipes were. There was very little that couldn't be cleaned up with a few judicious uses of a wipe.

Finally came the diapers. Sweet smelling, perfumed, folded, crisp and crinkling. They got the top spot right next to the wipes. Things that were guaranteed to be used needed to be easily on hand. And it wouldn't be much of a diaper bag without diapers, would it?

As for the paddle: That would be for the other hand, wouldn't it?

A small, thin smile, blossomed over shadowed lips. It was the smile of satisfaction.

Soon. Soon the little ones would come and play; they would need so much caring for.

Then it would be time to work.

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Tina was alone.

Alone and nowhere. It didn't occur to her in that moment how impossible that was. By definition, space and time were both facets of existence. If one existed, they had to be *somewhere* even if they didn't know where that somewhere was. Only the dead and the fictional could exist in a void.

None of that came to Tina, though. For all she knew or cared, she was in a blank void as she heard the baby crying. Her landscape a literal blank slate. No...not crying. The baby wasn't crying. She was screaming.

A baby girl's scream; caught somewhere between terror and tantrum. Despite being just eighteen and an only child Tina found it oddly familiar. Nostalgic without the good feelings. *Deja vu*.

Pulse picking up she wandered ahead, her long white nightgown fluttering in a non-existent breeze as her legs pumped. In front of her was a broken down hallway. Tight walls filled with chipped and scraped off paint.

Originally- Tina somehow knew even though she'd never asked- the dim yellow paint on the walls had been bright and cheery. It had been the color of sunshine. Time and darkness; especially darkness; had worn away at the facade. Now the yellow paint- what remained-was the color of sickness. Of jaundice. Of death.

Everything was scarier in the dark.

Beneath her silken nightie, Tina's bare feet plodded on. The carpet was threadbare and worn in more places than not. The very bottom fibers still persisted, like a sandpaper rash. A few spots didn't even have that much, leaving the cold smooth cement of the foundation exposed. As she half ran, and half jogged, trying to understand how she'd ended up here; Tina's toes curled every time they touched the rare bit of carpet that had struggled on intact.

Behind her? Behind her was nothing but a bright blank canvas of nothingness. She couldn't go there; though the exact "why" wouldn't come to her.

Sometimes things just worked that way....

A little girl lost in the woods, Tina ran down the hallway, hearing the random clacking of plastic on plastic; the sounds of playtime. She turned in a circle, pivoting on frightened feet; as if looking behind her might reveal a door, or stairwell, or some other escape from this strange

place that she couldn't remember coming to.

"tina."

Perhaps if she ran fast enough, Tina thought, she might escape this realm of concrete and decay. A shuttle escaping the bonds of gravity. It didn't make sense, but sometimes that's just how things were.

"tina."

The voice was muffled, but she'd heard it that time. Unfamiliar. Beckoning from the shadows. Laughing.

Tina turned back around towards the light. Even a blank canvas of nothingness might be better than what lay ahead in the dark.

Impossible.

With her meandering gait, she'd only gone a dozen or so steps, yet the other end of the hallway seemed so much further away.

Impossible, but true.

The laughter grew louder; more confident. Knowing laughter. Condescending. An adult watching a child struggle, their hand caught in a cookie jar that they just couldn't get out of. The laughter grew louder as Tina stayed put; erupting into a full blown cackle as Tina's heart started to pound.

This was wrong.

She wasn't supposed to be here...

"WAAAAH!"

The cry of a baby girl again! Such a familiar cry! The blink of an eye, and Tina saw that it wasn't a child crying, but a sheep bleating. A sheep. Like what she pretended to count until she drifted off. Like the night light she used to have all the way until middle school when she'd decided it was time to put away childish things and just go to sleep in the dark.

It's white wool was cast in pitch black by the shadows as it skittered away, running for its life.

"BAAAAH!"

“HEEE-HEEEE-HEEE-HEEE-HEEEE!”

Tina ran off to the side, neither towards the sheep nor the bright light at the end of the hallway. It didn't matter that there hadn't been a hallway or door for her to exit. It didn't matter that she shouldn't have been able to run; that there was no room in that wretched hallway. All that mattered was that she ran. She ran, and it was away from the knowing, witch like cackling.

That's just how things were...

The world changed again. No longer a hallway, but a playground. Blackness above her, there was no sky. Blackness beneath her, there was no ground. But directly beneath her feet was the blue steel meshed floor of an elevated walkway so common at playgrounds and parks.

Steel was not nearly so stainless, as the soles of her feet grazed by bits of rust. Hands trembling, she instinctively grabbed onto the safety bars at the edges, rather like the bars of a crib.

The air, such as it was, stank of stale urine; an accident that had long dried and never been properly cleaned up. Someone had peed in the ballpit. Surrounding her were plastic tubes and slides jutting out at impossible angles; a veritable jungle of plastic trunks and styrofoam noddle vines growing thicker with every step she dared to take. And all with the hollow thunks and muted skids, and slapping patters of tiny hands and knees crawling and rolling and sliding through them.

No laughter though. No mirth. Just the unsteady non-rhythm of a playground's blood being pumped through hollow plastic arteries.

She wasn't supposed to be here...

A movement in the dark!

Tina ran!

Past a built in rung ladder she sprinted. No going up! She wanted to get out, not up! Up would only lead back down. Ladders only went to chutes! She looked over her shoulder at the sailor's wheel! She could spin that wheel as much as she loved and would get nothing but the howling and screeching of badly oiled joints. She would go nowhere. She would win no prizes.

Out! Had to get out! She was lost! Lost on the playground!

Just like long ago when...

No! Don't think about it, Tina. Just get out! Keep moving!

Rounding the corner, Tina looked over the edge. Monkey bars, and a gymnast's rings dangled on the next section over, the ground still invisible in obsidian. She was high! So high off the ground that she couldn't see it! Keep moving. Must keep moving. Come, the monkey bars seemed to beckon her. Come down to our level. Swing from us and dangle your feet out over the abyss. Get tangled up in the ropes and nets and chains and rings.

Deep, knowing, feminine laughter accompanied the shadow that flitted below Tina. It knew what she thought. It knew what she imagined. It knew what she heard with only her heart; her heart that was beating faster and faster by the second.

Another corner. Another turn in a maze that made no sense. Ladders and struts that went nowhere. Fireman's poles that plummeted downwards into emptiness. Whirligigs and pinwheels that spun on their own. And just Tina in her nightgown...

Tina shut out what little light there was in her life and stepped through the shadowy tunnel. Her breath caught in her throat as she felt the plastic give a bit beneath her weight. Where was the light coming from anyways?

To say that Tina was brave implied like she was afraid and faced the danger anyway. This was simply not true. Even in this maze of unending steel twisting and turning, Tina felt she had only one choice but to go forward. Even with all the topsy turvy and movement and sound and winding and crisscrossing of the paths; Tina had never, in effect, left that hallway. Not really.

Rrrrrring! A chime! A bell! The start of something! School? A race? Tina spun around towards the metal dinging. The sound of nails on a chalkboard! Behind her!

Another blink, and Tina stood in front of a curtain; worn and moth eaten like everything else in this place! A withered, wizened hand peeked from behind the curtain and began to peel it back.

Tina didn't wait to see who was behind it. Tina ran. Tina sprinted. She didn't see the old straw sunhat with desiccated flowers poking out from the brim. And yet...

And yet Tina didn't get far. She'd walked only a dozen or so steps before and somehow traveled over a hundred yards. Now as she ran for her life, those same legs were carrying her less than a dozen strides. The air, still thick with the scent of old ammonia, seemed to constrict her; the ground conspired against her like a treadmill on reverse!

Tina was running as fast as she could, but her world crawled by at a leisurely pace. Panting just to keep her breath and her legs pumping, Tina didn't scream. She couldn't. Too out of breath. The most she could do was tremble and mewl as the person...the thing with the red and green bag crept along up to her. She didn't question why.

Sometimes things were just like that...

Tina looked back over her shoulder. She shouldn't have done so. A dirty brown sunhat filled with dead flowers and a matching ankle skirt. A dingy off-white victorian ruffle blouse, that contrasted with gray-black oxford block heels. And a green and red bowtie that coordinated perfectly with it's partner bag.

A bag in one hand, and a rough, splintered paddle in the other; dragging and scraping the floor as she walked...

A weak, muted squeak managed to leak out from Tina's throat, just as she rounded the corner. Must escape! Must escape! Too late, Tina realized she was trapped. A dead end. A criss crossing lattice blocked her way; a giant baby gate!

More impossibilities! This was the way she had come, wasn't it? Frustration and adrenaline bubbled over to unsilence her terror in one high pitched scream.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!"

It was the bleating of sheep. The cry of a baby girl. And it was indistinguishable from Tina's own wail.

And then silence.

Tina breathed. And listened. Nothing. No footsteps. No shadows cast of sun hats or paddles.

Behind her! A hand on her shoulder! Another reaching between her legs! "LET'S CHECK YOUR DIA-!"

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Tina shot bolt upright in her bed; her face and dirty blonde hair drenched in tears and sweat.

A knock on the door, and her mother entered. "You okay, Tina?" It was late. No trace of sunshine, no buzz of late night television. Mom was wearing her robe which she only put on when craving (or fetching) a two A.M. snack.

"Just a dream, Mom." Muscles tight. Breath short. But at least her voice was calm. Just a dream. Just a dream. She was home. In bed. Like she should have been.

Her mom stepped into the room and turned on the lights. "Some dream, judging from that."

Tina followed her mother's gaze down to her legs. It wasn't just her face that was soaked, and it

wasn't sweat that her legs were soaking in. Sweat didn't smell like that, nor did it make the sheets quite so cold and clammy on an otherwise crisp fall night.

She sat there, paralyzed by embarrassment and leftover shock from the bizarre dream she'd awoken from; stupidly peeling the sheets from her legs and off her, as if it might somehow undo the accident she'd just had.

Mom's boyfriend, clad in a wife beater and boxers (a wardrobe not that much different than what he wore during the day) leaned in. "Are you coming back to the sack or what?" he grumbled impatiently. Mom gently shoved him away. He looked at Tina, regarded her for a moment, and went back out into the hall. At least he had the decency not to comment further about her soaked mattress and wet sheets. Either that or he was too drunk to notice.

Tina's mom looked back to her. "Tina, hun, you either gotta stop drinking so much before bed or stop that kind of dreamin'." She glanced to the hallway. "One or the other." And with that, she closed the door, allowing Tina some much needed privacy.

Tina got out of bed and stripped the sheets from her bed. Her nightgown was just as ruined. They all went together in a giant pile. She'd stuff these into the washing machine, grab the stain remover and febreze from the laundry room, and try to get back to sleep with some fresh sheets after a quick shower.

But first she went over to her sock drawer and dug out the old sheep night light she'd never quite had the heart to get rid of.

Just in case....

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*Ten, nine, better watch your behind.  
Eight, seven, gonna learn your lesson.  
Six, five, never gonna thrive.  
Four, three, in your pants you pee.  
Two, one, Nanny says you're done....*

*-A traditional jump rope song passed down from kid generation to kid generation since time immemorial.*

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Tina couldn't stop talking about it the next morning all the way to school. "And even after I woke up it was like she was still there, watching me." She shook her head.

"Sounds like a real boogeyman," her best friend, Nancy said. "Like that old jump rope song:

Ten, nine, better watch your behind.” They piled out of Glenn’s car. Glenn was Nancy’s boyfriend, and Tina being Nancy’s bestie got to ride in the back on the way to school. Seniors were allowed to drive to school and park their cars in the parking lot. That meant that they didn’t have to worry about catching a bothersome school bus like the kiddies. It also meant they could sleep in a little later. There were perks to being a senior. Not that it mattered.

“I’ve been having bad dreams too,” Nancy added; a note of commiseration in her voice

“Even after I got changed into fresh sheets, I couldn’t go back to sleep,” Tina confessed.

Tina cocked an eyebrow as they walked. “Fresh sheets? Do you mean...?”

“Awwww,” Rod crept up from behind, “did you wet the bed, baby?” He laughed. No one else did. Rod was a jerk that didn’t realize how sleazy his slicked back hair looked or how Axe Body Spray was no substitute for a good shower. “Don’t feel bad, I have wet dreams, too.” As if to drive the point home, he pumped his fist up and down.

Tina and Rod were...complicated. If he wasn’t such a good lay, they might not be dating off. She could have ignored him, just then, she supposed, let him walk with them, but she just did not have time for his shit today.

Not after last night.

“Jizzing in your pants would require you to have balls,” Tina quipped, barely looking back at him.

Something sparked in Rod’s eyes. “Yeah...yeah...well...fuck you too!” Rod was that special kind of masculine that was neither quick witted nor thick skinned. He broke off from the trio and walked away, and would likely invent a comeback after.

Nancy and Glenn laughed quietly, but otherwise didn’t engage. They’d seen this scene play out too many times.

Tina looked back over her shoulder to make sure her kinda sorta beau was well and gone. “Rod says the sweetest things,” she said.

“Yeah. Real keeper, there.” Nancy replied sarcastically.

They came to a stop just outside of school. “So anyway,” she asked, “what did you dream about?” Misery loved company. At least she wasn’t the only one tossing and turning at night.

Nancy just said, “It was just a bad dream, okay, that’s it. That’s all they are.”

Glenn, his arm draped over Nancy like a coat, spoke up. “Yeah, and next time you’re having a



bad dream just remind yourself that it's just a dream and you'll wake right up. That's how it works for me, anyways."

The bell chimed it's dull electronic tone, signalling the beginning of yet another day of educational drudgery. Glenn and Nancy kissed goodbye, and Glenn jogged ahead of glass. Nancy and Tina had English first period; near the front entrance. Glenn had math near the back of the building.

Something just then occurred to Tina. "Hey!" she called after Glenn. "Did you have a nightmare too?"

Tina filed that idea away and turned back to Nancy. "Maybe we're gonna have a big earthquake or something. They say that weird things happen just before."

Nancy didn't laugh, but she did smile a bit. Arm and arm the two went to face the perils of dead poets and playwrights. Little did they know it would be the last time they'd walk into school together...

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"Thanks for staying with me here, tonight," Tina told her friends. "When my Mom told me she was taking off to Vegas with her boyfriend, I kinda freaked." She and Nancy sat on the couch, easing into each other, while Glenn sat on the floor, texting away on his phone.

"Glenn and Nancy to the rescue," Nancy assured her. "We got your back." All day, the dream about the playground and the shadowy figure stalking her had been with her. In some ways she'd never really woken up.

"It's so cool that your mom let you stay the night, Glenn."

"Yeah," Glenn said. "About that..." Nancy laughed a little bit. Tina threw him a questioning look. "So, I've got this cousin who lives...by the airport," he explained. "Mom's cool if I hang out with him. As far as she knows, I'm with him."

"But what if she tries to track your phone?" Tina asked.

"That's what I'm working on. I think I just downloaded an app that disables that one. Hold up..." Tina leaned forward and watched as Glenn texted. Nancy just hid her face in her hand and quietly shook her head. "Here...at...Barry's..." Glenn read his text as he typed it. "Noisy...as...hell...but...fun..."

Glenn looked up from his phone to the girls, a cocky little smirk on his lips. "I think she believes it." He looked down and grinned. "And the app is working!" He pumped his elbow in a bit of celebration. His glee didn't last long. "She wants me to send a picture of me and Barry right now! FUCK!" He turned off his phone. "I'm...gonna have to do some explaining...hope Barry can cover for me."

“Busted!” Nancy laughed.

Glenn just shrugged. “Worth it. I’ll probably get chewed out. I’ve been chewed out before.”

More laughter, this time from all three. “See?” Nancy said. “I told you you’d feel better with some friends around.”

“Yeah,” Tina said. But the moment passed. “It’s just that all day, I keep thinking about this lady and her weird face, and thinking of that big paddle.”

Something akin to confusion and suspicion flashed in Nancy’s eyes. “Paddle?” Silently, Tina nodded. “That’s so weird that you say that,” Nancy said. “That makes me remember the dream I had last night!” Unlike Tina, Nancy sounded lighter for saying it. As if the two girls having the same nightmare was mildly amusing instead of foreboding.

Tina sat up a little straighter. “What did you dream?”

“I dreamt about a lady with a grody green and red bag. She looked like one of the nannies on T.V., but creepier.”

Neither one saw the look on Glenn’s face. It was as if he was hearing about his own troubled sleep. “What about the paddle?” Tina pressed.

Nancy bit her lip in thought. “Oh yeah, she had a paddle. It was like one of those things you see in hazing or like BDSM stuff, I guess, but it was really rough. Homemade, and splintered at parts. She’d drag it along the ground or thump it on things. It looked like something she made herself.” Nancy kept her tone upbeat. It was just a stupid dream after all. “She kept dragging along the floor and it made this sound like kghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” She made the back of her tongue go up against the roof of her mouth and exhaled.

Done fast it would have sounded like a poor impression of walkie talkie static. Done slowly, it was eerily similar to the quiet groaning of heavy wood dragging across the floor.

“Nancy,” Tina whispered. “You dreamed about the same freak I did.”

Glenn came to join them. “That’s impossible.”

KGHHH....

The trio looked out the window into the darkness.

“What was that?” Tina asked.

Glenn stood up. “Nothing...”

KGHHH...

"I heard it too," Nancy said. The three young adults stood up and cautiously opened the side door into Tina's backyard.

Glenn was the first out into the darkness. "Anybody there?" The girls came out, still staying just a few steps from the door. "Hello?" Glenn repeated. Still there was no answer. "I'm gonna kick your ass...!" If anyone was listening, they didn't believe Glenn's threat. Even Glenn, wholesome All-American type that he looked didn't sound like he believed it. "Here kitty kitty kitty!"

Still nothing.

Nancy's boyfriend turned around and started walking back towards the house. "Probably a racoon or someth..." The shadow that enveloped Glenn and brought him to the ground was fast, and strong. Bigger than Glenn and meaner. And reeking of Axe.

"Boom!" Rod said as he climbed off of Glenn. "What a tackle! What a sack!" Ignoring Glenn he sauntered up to Tina, holding the old broken table leg left nearly forgotten in Tina's garage. "Kinda creepy huh? The way it scrapes across the patio." He let it drop clunk into the grass. "You should have seen his face," Rod laughed thumbing over to the other boy.

"YoU sHoUIDa SeEn HiS fAcE," Glenn parroted back, mockingly. Immediately the two were in each other's face, chests puffed out and chins held high.

Tina grabbed her boyfriend by the elbow. Time to diffuse the situation. "We're having a sleepover. Girls only. Glenn was just leaving."

Rod backed away but clearly wasn't buying it. "Your Mom home?"

"Of course." Tina lied. "What are you doing here."

Rod pivoted to her. "I came to make up. Came to say I'm sorry." His grin was nothing short of wolfish. He saw right through her. He always did. And the look on his face told her that the blood was quickly going down south. "You guys having an orgy?"

"Just keeping me company," Tina said. Already she was letting herself be led back into her house. Already, she was starting to relax and tense up in all the right places. Rod had that effect on her.

It might be nice to have a creep of her own to protect her from the lady in her nightmares...

"Hey," Glenn called out.

He froze when Rod turned around. "Relax you two. We'll get her mother's bed. You two can have the rest," then ducked out of sight.

"Seriously," Tina said, her petite blonde frame still in the doorway. "Stay. You make me feel safe. Don't leave me here with this luuuunaatic!" Tina's last word was cut off by a fit of giggles as Rod returned and started to cart her off to her mother's California King.

Left alone, Glenn realized just how pretty Nancy looked in the moonlight, and how much better she smelled than Tina's creeper of a fuck buddy.

"Glenn, no." Nancy pushed him away when he leaned in for a little fun. "Not tonight. We're here for Tina." She ran her hand through her curly brown hair.

Glenn felt his attitude deflate with his dick. "Why? Who cares? It's just a bad dream."

"Because we're her friends," Nancy said. "She needs us. We gotta be mature and not fuck around."

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Glenn laid there in the dark of Tina's living room. The couch made a poor bed and the living room a poor bedroom. He could hear Tina and Rod going at it through the walls. Neither were quiet about it.

Blue balled beyond belief, Glenn could only sulk at the soundtrack to the two horny highschoolers getting it on. Meanwhile, he knew Nancy, pure and mature as ever, slept in Tina's room.

"Maturity sucks."

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Nancy slept in Tina's bed, blissfully unaware of the sounds coming from the other bedroom. But she was not blissful otherwise. Nor was she unaware. Not totally.

Eyes closed, and breath steady, Nancy did not dream. But she did have the peculiar feeling that something, or someone was watching her. She didn't hear the wall above the headboard creek and moan as it warped. She didn't see it become thin like puddy and mold itself into a humanoid shape. She didn't feel the warmth of another not-quite-body looking down at her, bending over, reaching out like a woman readying to scoop her baby out of a crib....

When she rolled over and opened her eyes, the wall was completely normal. Nothing out of the ordinary. Over the side of the bed, Nancy noticed a little lamb nightlight, lying there on the floor. She hadn't seen this in years. She would have thought Tina tossed this away with her training bras, but her old friend never had outgrown her fear of the dark.

Maybe that's why she still had a waterproof sheet on the mattress. Or maybe that's why her

bathroom smelled faintly of baby powder. Maybe this bedwetting thing was more persistent than Tina was hinting at; the bad dreams just a justification.

Nancy took a moment and plugged the old night light in. Just in case. She took a moment to touch and push against the wall, too; confirming that it was solid. Just in case. She gave it a few quiet knocks. Just in case.

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PLINK!

Tina awoke in her mother's bed, the sound of pebbles hitting glass making her jump. She looked over to Rod; still sound asleep and snoring. Rod was practically a machine in the sack, and orgasming was his off button. It's one of the things she liked about him, actually.

Sometimes a good lay really is what a body and a troubled mind needed.

It has also been nice, hearing Rod confess he'd been having nightmares. "What? Guys can have bad dreams too. You don't have the market cornered." He gave her a final kiss, before "No more bad dreams for either of us now." That was about as emotional and open as Rod could get. In a way, Tina had been proud of him; the emotionally stunted mal-adjusted idiot.

PLINK!

Another pebble, this one harder, stopped Tina from rolling over and rejoining her boyfriend in unconsciousness. Definitely a pebble, too. There were nor branches from nearby trees long enough to scrape at the glass.

"Rod?" she tried shaking her boyfriend awake. All she got was snoring for her trouble.

PLINK! PLINK!

She rolled back towards the window and started to sit up.

"tinaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

It was a whisper, a nagging bit of paranoia scratching at her brain. A sound carried by fear more than air. Picking Rod's shirt up off the floor, she slipped in on over herself; it's bagginess preserving her modesty as she padded over to the window.

PLINK!

A flash of purple. Not a pebble. But a...ball? A plastic ball, like in a children's ball pit rocketed up to the window.

PLINK!

The next one, red, left a crack in the glass. Tina held her breath and leaned closer; feeling the break in the glass for herself. What could do THAT with a plastic ball? It was full dark outside. No stars. Whoever...or whatever...still lay in the shadows. And somehow, Tina knew it was waiting for her.

“tinaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Tina stepped back. It knew her name. It had come for her. Eyes staring straight into the abyss just outside her window, Tina dared to say “Who do you think you are?” She paused. No answer “Whoever you are...”

The poor girl didn't feel very brave, just then. Only fools weren't scared, however. She took some comfort in that.

Tina couldn't say why she left her mother's bedroom and turned on the back porchlight. It's just what happened sometimes. She didn't know why she didn't call the police, either. The flashing lights of a cruiser and an officer at her door might scare away whatever was out there. Or they'd just think it was a prank and ignore her...

Sometimes things were just like that....

Clad only in a pair of panties and Rod's shirt, she switched on the lights, and ventured outside the safety of her home. No going back now. “Somebody there?”

“tina!” The reply was short and crisp. An adult losing her patience with a particularly stubborn child.

And like the stubborn child whose will was finally waning, Tina wandered outside in short uneven steps. Out into the dark backyard. Out into the darkness.

“Tina...” louder this time. A growl or a groan. A muttering maybe. A beckoning, definitely.

On toddling, uncertain steps, Tina kept going towards it. Past the junk in her backyard, and by the old rusted playground her dad...her real dad...had set up for her when she was little. Couldn't have been older than three. There was something oddly familiar about those gymnast rings, come to think of it.

Out into the alleyway, she went, some dark force compelling her to find the source of her torment. The hollow rattling sound of beads inside thin plastic almost gave her whiplash as a pink hula hoop rolled along the ground and pittered to a stop.

The clicking of heels on pavement made Tina spin again, and the silhouette of a sunhat took

Tina's breath away.

"Now....!" the figure came into the light. Her face terribly scarred, her clothes musty, as if dug up from a grave or a tomb. The dirty green and red bag slung over one shoulder; the splintered wooden paddle hanging from a strap from the other.

Tina started to back away, to look "Shit..."

The thing's arms stretched out, impossibly long. Inhumanly long! Long enough that the woman stood in the middle of the road, but her fingers brushed fences on either side of the road.

"Come...to...Nanny!" Her voice was gnarled and scratchy. Her smile crooked and eyes encased in shadow. Arms outstretched, she was a grotesque parody of a caregiver beckoning for a hug. "COME! COME!"

Even as she walked, the paddle, impossibly large, dragged on the ground, scrapping the concrete road.

"Please God..." Tina heard herself say.

In a blur, the woman's arms were the right size and the paddle in her hand. "This," she padded the wooden club in the palm of her other wretched hand, "is God, now."

Tina ran. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her and it still wasn't enough. The cackling witch behind her waved the paddle in the air, chasing after her; both moving at snail's pace...the pace of a nightmare. She looked behind her. The hag was gaining on her!

"Peek-a-boo!" The hag was in front of her! Burned hands covered a burned face, opening to reveal the giggling hag.

"NO! NO! NO!" The poor girl naked save for her panties and shirt, ran back towards her house. If she could get inside she would be safe! If she could get inside she'd be safe! She ran, but now was even slower than before.

Breathless, she managed to waddle out of the street and into her backyard, slamming the gate behind her. Waddle? Something was getting thicker, and it wasn't the air. Her panties! Something was wrong with panties! Just outside her backyard, the girl stopped and lifted up her shirt. That's why she was having trouble running: Her panties had thickened into a diaper! A diaper?! Not an adult one, but a larger version of something a toddler might wear. All the extra padding had thrown off her gait!

She didn't know why she was wearing a diaper, just then. Sometimes things just worked that way....

"Tina!" From out behind an impossibly skinny the wicked woman jumped. "Watch this!" Her

voice was saccharine sweet; mockingly so. Tina stood there, paralyzed as the woman removed her thumb. An old trick. An easy trick. The most basic of slight of hand. Something that grandparents have been doing forever... until spurts of green ichor started streaming from the stump.

It was good that Tina had been wearing a diaper just then. Otherwise, she might be standing in a puddle. The warm heat pooling and squishing between her legs was cold comfort, just then.

The last few feet to her backdoor were an eternity. The gleeful cackling of the hag threw off her balance; not to mention the swelling Luvs between her legs. Scarred hands yanked at her shoulders; pulling her away from safety and salvation.

The knob wriggled and stuck in Tina's hands. Locked. "NANCY!" she screamed. "NANCY OPEN THE DOOR!"

No one came to the door...

The only one that heard her was the dead Nanny.

"Naughty, naughty girl!"

The last thing Tina would remember seeing was the grass and junk in her own backyard as she was pulled over the monster's knee. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The cry sounded so much like a scared baby girl. A scared baby girl about to get a spanking.

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Rod woke when he was kicked in the ribs. "AAAAAH! AAAAAAH! NO! STOP!" Tina screamed under the covers.

"Tina?" he tried to ask, "Tina what's wrong!"

All he got in reply was Tina's agonizing screaming...that and the sound of laughter, coming from under the covers. "I'M SORRY!" Tina yelled. "I'M SORRY! I'LL BE A GOOD GIRL I PROMISE! ROD! ROD! HELP ME ROD!"

Panicked, Rod ripped the covers off his girlfriend. She thrashed there on her mother's bed, her eyes closed and her ass up in the air. Rod stood there in his tighty whiteys, mouth agape as Tina struggled against nothing, wearing only his shirt and a...

DIAPER?! The cartoon monkey on the back (and the yellow discoloration between her legs) made it kind of obvious. "PLEASE! DON'T! ROD! HELP! I'M SORRRRRRY!"



“TINA” he called out. “TINA.” But Tina couldn’t hear him.

In a flash, the borrowed shirt was hiked up, leaving nothing covering Tina’s backside but the wet Luvs inexplicably taped around her hips.

WHAP!

The sound thick wood hitting pulpy padding filled the air like a cannon shot. Tina screamed like she was being murdered...and in a way she was. “MOMMY!”

WHAP!

“DA-DA!”

Tina kicked and screamed and thrashed as her body started to levitate off the mattress. Unable to believe his eyes, Rod went to turn on a lamp to make sure that the dark wasn’t playing tricks on him. Tina’s whirling thrashing form swinging into him more than confirmed what his eyes suspected.

“HAAAAHAAAAHAAAAHAAAAHAA!” He’d heard that laugh too. He’d heard it before even.

WHAP!

“GAGAGAGA!”

Up the walls, Tina’s screeching form was dragged. Eyes still slammed shut, she clawed at the wallpaper, trying to tear herself free as another heavy WHAP sounded.

“WAAAAAAAAAH!”

Now she was crawling on the ceiling.

WHAP!

“WAAAAAAAAAH”

“HAAAAAHAAAAAHAAAAHAAAA!”

Finally, words couldn’t even describe the incomprehensible wailing pouring out of Tina’s mouth. All throat, no lips. She sounded more an infant than a young woman about to graduate into college. She looked it, too.

All Rod could do was scream her name as she was dragged along by the unseeable force until she was set gently down, wafting back onto her mother’s bed.

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Nancy woke to screaming. Tina's screaming. On feet that would not carry her quickly enough she ran to the master bedroom and began banging on the door. "Tina?! Tina?! TINA?!"

Her knocking went unanswered. "Who did this?!" she heard Rod say through the door. "I'll kill you! Who did this?!" Only Tina's wails of terror and pain let Nancy know that she was alive. But who was Rod yelling at?"

Glenn ran in, fully clothed, from the living room. Together they broke down the door. The brief silence lasted just as long as the crash still echoed. The room was empty. Trashed, but empty. Tina lay in bed feebly kicking at the air and crying nonsensically. An open window, the only clue to Rod's whereabouts.

Tina lay on the bed, sobbing and inconsolable, crying around her own fingers jammed into her mouth. "Tina," Nancy said "What's wrong?" Nancy's best friend since childhood didn't answer. She just mumbled and cried through tear streaked cheeks. "What happened?" More crying. "Are you okay? Where's Rod?" Nancy was feeling less and less certain with each question left unanswered.

The smell of urine filled Nancy's nostrils, and her eyes went below Tina's waist. Nancy had babysat enough times to recognize a Luvs, though she'd never seen one that big. She'd also babysat enough to know when a diaper was on the verge of leaking. She felt the sheets just beneath her friend. Correction...leaked.

"Glenn," she called to her boyfriend. "I think Tina OD'd or something. Something's going on in her eyes...she's not all there. There's something wrong with her."

"I'll say." Glenn wasn't joking.

Nancy wasn't in the mood. "Go search her room or something. Look through her drawers! Maybe we can figure out what she took!" Glenn didn't need further direction.

Nancy waited in tense silence, positioning herself so that Tina's head was in her lap. She gently shushed her friend, and just like a baby, Tina started to calm down with just a little gentle cooing and pets to her forehead. "You're gonna be alright, Tina. Everything's just fine." Even then, Nancy could hear the lie on her lips.

"Nancy," Glenn said. "We've got a problem."

"No shit we've got a problem!" Nancy screamed. "My best friend is bawling like a baby in a fucking diaper!"

"There's more..."

“More what?”

“More diapers,” Glenn said. “And a crib. Changing table too...”

Nancy stood up. “Where?”

“Tina’s room. It’s a giant nursery.”

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Nancy sat with her mother in the police station, clutching a box of tissues like they were a kind of life raft. She’d called the police and told them the whole story. About how her best friend was drooling and babbling, and Tina’s boyfriend was missing from their mother’s bedroom.

It was just like Glenn had said: In the thirty seconds or so since they had busted open the door, Tina’s bedroom no longer looked like something belonging to a young lady; but instead was now the home of a baby. A big one, too.

It took both her and Glenn working together to lift Tina and carry her into the nursery. There, she changed Tina’s diaper- there were more than enough- while Glenn looked away.

The cops came, asked a few questions; mostly about Rod and where Tina’s parents were. Then they had her and Tina come down to the station. The strange thing was they didn’t so much as comment on the giant crib or infant playmat in the corner.

Nancy just sat there in silence, her mother at first assuring her that everything was going to be okay. Soon enough they had run out of things to say before Nancy had run out of tears.

The door opened and in walked Lt. Donald Thompson; a middle aged man with hairline that was just starting to recede. Nancy looked up from her tissues. “Hey, Dad.” There was no excitement in her voice. No terror either. Her confusion and shock had progressed beyond excitement or fear, and slid down into a numbing iceberg.

“Hey sweetie,” her father gave her a chaste kiss on the top of her head. “How are you doing?”

“Bad...” Nancy let her silence speak the rest.

Lt. Thompson looked over to Nancy’s Mom. “What was she doing there, Marge?”

“Hello to you too, Donald.” She was cordial, but her voice was ice. The divorce hadn’t been pleasant; and everytime her folks were around each other, the same old arguments popped up...usually about how they were raising Nancy. When Marge and Donald Thompson were around each other, Nancy might as well have been eight instead of eighteen.

“What was she doing?” Dad repeated the question.

“She was babysitting,” Mom said. “Just making a little extra money.”

“In that part of town?” Dad was incredulous. “On a school night?” Part small town cop, part father, all overprotective and judgement asshole. “Looking after Marla Gray’s kid? That drunk? There’s gotta be better ways to earn some spending money.”

Nancy didn’t look up, but she felt more awake? Babysitting? Really? Was this some kind of bad joke? Tina had been attacked by something. Attacked and transformed. Last Nancy knew, Tina was still bouncing on some lady copy’s knee.

“You wanna tell me what you were doing over there? With a boy?”

The question through...why was THAT what they were focusing on?

“The three of us were just sleeping over,” Nancy insisted. “Nothing was supposed to happen. We were just keeping Tina company in case she got scared. She’s been having bad dreams.”

Her Dad arched an eyebrow. “Three? You mean that Rod Lane character was invited?”

“Well, no...” Nancy said. “But he just came over and...”

“So we’ve got him for trespassing, breaking and entering AND attempt to kidnap,” her father said.

“Kidnap?” Nancy tried to speak up. “Rod wasn’t trying to kidnap-?”

“Then why did he lock himself in the room with the baby?”

There was that word again. “Baby?! Dad I-”

“Is he one of those sickos?”

“Dad,” Nancy almost screamed. The tears were coming back now. “What’s wrong with you? Tina’s not a baby? She’s my best friend!”

Both her parents exchanged looks; they were worried. It was Nancy’s mother that spoke up first. “Nancy,” she started in low and soft, “you’ve been through a lot tonight. I know you feel responsible for what almost happened to that baby girl, but it’s not your fault. You were her babysitter and you did the right thing. You saved her. You called the cops. You asked for help. But that doesn’t mean you have to say things like you’re her best friend. Okay?”

More of that numbness overcame Nancy. Numbness, dotted with fresh little pinpricks of shock

and confusion assaulted her. "O...okay..." She wasn't really okay. She didn't understand what was going on in the conversation, and in order to do that.

"Okay," Lt. Thompson nodded, more to himself than to anyone else. "Get her home safe," he said to her mother. "I'll get on finding that Lane punk." Seeming to consider the matter settled, he went to walk out his office door.

"Dad," Nancy called out. "What about Tina?"

Lt. Thompson stopped rubbed his temples. "Her mother's out of town. We're gonna put her with CPS for now. Foster home. There's already an officer doubling back to the scene to get diapers and blankets. Some formula. Maybe a few of her favorite toys. Mom will have to go to a judge to get her back. She'll be okay. She's too little to remember any of this long term."

But Tina wasn't okay, Nancy knew. Tina wasn't supposed to be in diapers, or sleep in a crib or drinking formula. She was supposed to be sitting next to Nancy in English class first thing tomorrow morning. Why couldn't Mom or Dad or any of the cops see that?

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The little television on the kitchen fairly roared out the morning news:

"POLICE SAY THAT A POTENTIAL KIDNAPPING, POSSIBLY IN CONNECTION WITH A CHILD ABDUCTION RING WAS BARELY THWARTED LAST NIGHT WHEN A MAN TRIED TO BREAK INTO A HOME AND STEAL AWAY WITH A CHILD NO OLDER THAN ONE YEAR OLD. POLICE SAY THE PRIME SUSPECT IS ROD LANE. LANE ALLEGEDLY BROKE INTO THE HOME WHILE THE MOTHER WAS AWAY, LEAVING ONLY A SITTER TO DEFEND HER. LANE IS NOW THE SUBJECT OF A CITYWIDE MANHUNT. IF YOU HAVE ANY INFOR-"

The old boob tube was shut off just as Nancy entered the kitchen, but she'd heard enough. The whole city, if not the world, thought that Tina Gray was an infant, and that her boyfriend was some kind of child-napper. What had happened to the world last night?

Nancy and her mother shared an awkward stare; just long enough for her to get her backpack and walk out the door. Glenn was grounded, and got his car taken away. Good enough. Nancy could use the walk to school. It's not like she needed the car now that Tina wasn't...

Tina...

"Where do you think you're going?" It wasn't accusatory. Mom was clearly concerned. She looked at Nancy as if she were sick, not defiant.

"To school...?" Nancy replied. Why wouldn't she go to school?

“Honey, you were tossing and turning all night last night. You have no business going to school today.”

That first part was true. Nancy hadn't slept a wink. Yet with how bizarre everyone around her had been acting, Nancy thought that she might be the one sleeping. There was a bizarrely comforting thought: Maybe she'd wake up. Any minute now, she'd be back in Tina's (adult) bed, and find Glenn moping on the couch and Tina and Rod still shacked up together in the master bedroom.

The more she thought about it, the more Nancy hoped it was true. That the last twelve hours or so had all been a ridiculous dream was infinitely more reassuring and far less bizarre than what felt like the truth.

“I've got to go to school, mother,” Nancy said. “Otherwise I'll just sit up there and go crazy.” This is why Alice kept walking through Wonderland. To stay still meant to accept the madness. To venture forward, even if it was into more madness, kept it at bay. Even being bored in English class was better than being trapped in her room, alone with her own thoughts.

“Did you sleep?” Mom asked. Clearly, she already knew the answer.

Nancy took on a pleading tone. “I'll sleep in study hall.” She needed sleep, she knew. Just not here. Not now. Not while Tina's screams still rattled around in her head. Not while she kept replaying finding the room a nursery and changing her best friends' diaper. Not while she still revisited the conversation with Dad at the police station: CPS. Foster Home. Blankets, toys, formula.

“I'd rather...keep busy, you know?” She took a sip of coffee from her mother's mug. She didn't want to go back to sleep. Sleep meant revisiting last night; sleep meant more of Tina's crying and mewling. Sleep meant staring into her best friends' eyes and them not staring back.

Mom grabbed the mug back. “Right home after?”

“Right home after.” Nancy promised.

They gave each other a kiss, and fueled mostly by adrenaline, Nancy made her way out the door.

On her way to school, Nancy couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was being watched. That just out of sight, something was following her, trailing her, hunting her. She'd had last night, too, come to think of it. It was the feeling that someone she couldn't see was watching over her, readying itself. A tiger waiting to pounce...or a teacher anxiously awaiting first bell to begin instruction..

Nancy stopped and looked back over her shoulder. The man in the suit and tie and sunglasses

didn't seem to be following her. He stood perfectly still against that elm tree on the other side of the street. Though what was he doing there? It wasn't a bus stop and he wasn't a neighbor. Not a face she saw everyday.

A dozen or so steps later, she whirled her head around. Gone. Nancy was being followed. What to do? What did he want? Did she scream? Did she call for help?

From the bushes behind her, a hand clapped over her mouth while its pulled her in and dragged her into the foliage. Nancy screamed in panic, not even recognizing the smell of fresh body odor and old Axe.

"I'm not gonna hurt you!" Rod growled to her even as she thrashed. "I'm not gonna hurt you!" He loosened his grip, and Nancy pried his disgusting hand off of her mouth. Rod hunkered down in the cover of the bushes. Sweaty. Unwashed. Barefoot. Wearing nothing but his jeans and jacket. The shirt that Tina had been found in was collected as "evidence" of some sort. Rod looked at Nancy, eyes tired and desperate. "They're gonna kill me, for sure."

"Nobody's going to kill you," Nancy said. Rod clearly didn't believe her. Nancy didn't believe herself. "Did you do it?"

Rod looked like he was about to vomit, he was so disgusted. "Do it? Do what? Sleep with my girlfriend? Yeah, I did!"

"No, not that," Nancy said. "The other thing..." Rod looked confused. "Did you put her in a D-I-A-?"

Rod cut her off. "Hell no! Tina's not a baby! But I'm the only one who seems to know that!"

"You're not the only one who knows."

Rod didn't reply, immediately. Instead his breathing slowed, and his eyes showed a level of gratitude that Nancy didn't think the young man capable of. "Everybody thinks I'm a kidnapper, or some kind of..." his voice cracked rather than allow him to finish the sentence.

"What happened last night?" Nancy asked. "You were screaming an awful lot."

The modern day greaser just shook his head. "I never touched her." He let out a breath. "There was somebody else there." Even he couldn't completely believe what he was saying.

"You were screaming like crazy."

"I didn't do it!"

“The door was locked from your side!” It didn’t make any more sense now that she was saying it, but it made her feel better to be on the offense.

“Don’t look at me like I’m some fuckin’ nutter or something!” Rod proclaimed through gritted teeth.. “You think I put a big pair of baby pants on my girlfriend, spanked her padded ass, and then snuck out and made everybody think she was a baby?”

Not when he said it like that. The whole thing was getting more difficult to believe by the minute. Wait a minute...”Spanked?”

“Yeah,” Rod replied. “Kept hearing this slapping sound, right on her butt. She kicked and screamed every time...till she didn’t.” His eyes got hazy, reliving the moment. “But it wasn’t me. Somebody else did it. And when I find ‘em I’m gonna-!”

More movement. A familiar figure in a police officer’s uniform. A gun drawn.

“Just move away from her, son,” Lt. Thompson said in a low, even voice. Rod looked and saw the gun pointed at him. Arms up, slowly he stood. Nancy too. “Reeeeeal easy, like your ass depended on it,” Nancy’s dad intoned.

Like his ass depended on it. A poor choice of words. Police sirens squealed out even as Tina’s (ex?) boyfriend darted for the street.

“Hold it!” Lt. Thompson called out.

Nancy stepped in front of her father, covering Rod’s barefoot escape. “NO!” He was innocent! She couldn’t prove it, but she knew Rod was innocent. Him being guilty would have meant that Nancy didn’t understand how the world really worked.

“Jesus Christ!” her father cursed, lowering his gun.

Running fast on tired legs and sore bare feet, Rod didn’t make it far down the street before the first police car cut off his escape. He didn’t make it ten feet before the second blocked his retreat and he was surrounded by men with guns. Rod was a lot of things: Most of them bad. An escape artist wasn’t one of them.

Nancy had to watch as Rod was held at gunpoint, slammed on the ground, and cuffed. “I didn’t do anything, Nancy! I promise!” That last outburst wouldn’t look good for him n court.

Rod wasn’t behind whatever happened to Tina. He wasn’t smart enough. He’d been following Tina and pulled her off the street because the whole world was out to get him and Tina was the closest thing he had to a friend, just then.



A realization came over Nancy. Whether people thought of Tina as an adult or not, Nancy was on the shortlist of people that Rod might try to contact. "Daddy!" she followed her father out onto the street. "You used me!"

"What the hell were going to school for, anyway?!" It wasn't a question as much as an accusation. Again, she wasn't Nancy the eighteen year old, but Lt. Thompson's little girl. And little girls didn't go to school after a scary punk broke into a house where they were babysitting.

There was nothing to do. Nothing to do except walk away.

"NANCY!" her father called after her. She ignored him, instead focusing on the sound of Rod's struggling as he was dragged to the squad car. "NANCY! NANCY!"

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"What is scene," the English teacher said, "is not always what is real." That was a real mood. Mrs. Morgan had watched Dead Poets Society about three too many times, and was always trying to be profound and inspiring, but often her lectures came across as a dramatic monologue, more than an English Lit class. This was doubly true now that the class had shifted into its Shakespeare unit.. Still, the lady had a point.

Slumping forward in her desk, Nancy lulled her head to her side. Somebody was in Tina's seat. Somebody Nancy didn't even know. But no one missed Tina or remarked about it. It was like that seat had always belonged to the boy sitting there; or that Tina had never been in school with them at all.

"For example, in the final lines of a Mid Summer Night's Dream," Mrs. Morgan continued, "Shakespeare has Robin Goodfellow assure the audience, as well as the main characters that they 'have but slumbered here, while these visions did appear, and this meek and idle theme no more yielding but a dream."

Ugh. More dream talk. More sleep talk.

Mrs. Morgan was walking around the classroom as she spoke. Making Nancy's desk in the back of the room less than idea for catching a few winks. "That and considering that he also has the famous play-within-a-play scene; where his actors play villagers badly playing mythic characters while OTHER actors play mythical characters as audience members making jokes about how poor the acting is, all in front of an ACTUAL live audience..." she paused for effect, "Well frankly, nothing is as it seems. It was very 'meta' at the time." That actually got a polite chuckle from the rest of the class and a tired, quiet groan from Nancy.

"Shakespeare was actually fascinated with the power of dreams, stories and illusions," Mrs. and how they affected people, turning illusion into reality. From MacBeth's soliloquy on life being a walking shadow, to some of his later poems, Shakespeare compared life itself to a story, and noticed how mankind broke itself down into the same repeated patterns and roles again and again. Theater and stories were both illusion AND real to him."

“John?” she said. “Will you go ahead and read, please?”

The guy sitting in what used to be Tina’s desk stood up and walked to the front of the class. No page number was given, but everyone looked down in their books.

Sometimes things just worked that way...

“At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.”

The new boy read flatly, and uninterested. Like he wasn’t used to the sound of his own voice.

“the whining school-boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail  
Unwillingly to school.”

Somehow the guy was managing to make this worse. Did he know what words were coming out of his mouth. He didn’t have to go full theater geek or nothing, but read with a little feeling. Nancy closed her eyes. This was having the opposite effect. She closed her eyes...

“the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow.”

John’s voice was literally about to put her to sleep. The palm of her hand was almost a pillow by this point.

A new voice called out. “Nancy...?” The high school senior’s eyes popped open. It couldn’t be! It had to be! There in the doorway, clad in only an obscenely used Luvs, her tits hanging out and her hair tied up in little ribbons, was Tina. “Nancy...” she sat there, just outside the classroom, splay legged and diaper bulging light yellow and deep purple. Deep purple for the decorations printed on the outside. Light yellow for what had been put inside and soaked through and discolored any patch of whiteness that might have remained.

“Nancy...” Tina smiled, like it wasn’t the name of her best friend but a new word she was trying out for the first time. She reached both arms out and up, like a child wishing to be carried.

“the whining school-boy with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail  
Unwillingly to school.”

Nancy looked around the class. Didn’t anybody else see this? But nobody was looking at the doorway. No one else had heard the big baby calling out for attention. To make matters more

bizarre, the new kid was apparently backtracking. Lost his place.

Nancy looked back to the doorway. No Tina anymore, just a puddle of piss where she had been. A giant baby with a VERY leaky diaper.

The reader's voice dropped to nearly a whisper...

"And finally the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms."

The kid hadn't just lost his place, he was starting over. Except he didn't keep reading. He hadn't lost his place. 'First' was now 'finall', too. He was going backwards. All the way to the lover section of the poem, and then backwards to school and then infant.

Nancy stood up as he finished reading, a knowing not-so-gentle smirk on his face. He said nothing more. The rest of the class kept staring at him. The teacher too. No one stopped her from walking out into the hallway, over the puddle that Tina had left.

Sometimes things just worked that way...

Stepping out into the empty hallways, she saw the not-so-little girl just rounding the corner, drips and dribbles still coming out from her legs; the leak guards long having failed. "Tina?" Nancy called out. But if Tina heard her name, she didn't respond. She just shuffled and crawled out of sight, leaving a wet trail behind her. Rather like a slug...

The hall was empty too. And even though some of the classroom doors were open, there was no sound coming through them. Nancy didn't know why. Didn't care either.

Sometimes things just worked that way...

Tina! She had to find Tina! Following the trail of urine, the senior broke into a run. "TINA?!" She rounded the corner!

WHAM!

The girl's sprint was cut short as she collided with what must have been the only other person in the hallway: A pudgy girl with dark black hair and a red and green sash. A hall monitor, of all the antiquated juvenile things! Some students were given the sash and patrolled the halls on off periods, running errands for the front office or playing security guard...

Both girls went down to the floor. Fueled by adrenaline, Nancy was easily on her feet first. She looked down at the hall monitor. The girl had a bloody nose and her hair up in pigtails of all things! What self-respecting young woman would have her hair up in pigtails? If Tina had had

long enough hair, she'd likely have her hair up in pig-tails right now...

The little girl hairstyle combined with a pleasantly pudgy face wasn't doing anything to make the monitor seem any more authoritative. She sat there on her ass, splay legged and clumsy looking; just like Tina had been a moment ago. Speaking of Tina, Nancy might have been wrong, but there seemed to be something of a swollen bulge coming from between the young lady's legs.

Almost like...

But no...

No it couldn't be...

"Where's your hallpass?" the monitor demanded. She seemed unfazed and unconcerned with her bleeding nose.

Nancy felt her throat start to close up with anger. "Screw your hall pass," she growled, walking right past the stupid twat. She broke out into a jog; then a run.

"HEY NANCY!" The voice from behind her wasn't the nasally, whiney voice of the hall monitor. It was older. Deeper. Nancy looked over her shoulder. The hall-monitor was up on her feet again. A gleeful, sadistically playful look was on her face, which was now bleeding from more than just her left nostril. She patted a large, heavy looking paddle in the palm of her hand. "No running in the hallway!" It wasn't her voice, but the older, raspier one. So was the laugh that followed.

No time! No time to ask questions, no time to formulate a quip! No time to deck this wanna be cop in the face! She had to find Tina! Had to follow the trail!

She went past an open locker that was so stuffed with teddy bears that they were overflowing out the hallway and piling up like the leaves in fall. She ignored the faint breeze and the scent of lavender baby powder. Had to find Tina!

She made a right turn down the stairs. She couldn't remember if there had been a downstairs before; but it didn't matter right now. HAD TO FIND BABY TINA! And the stick trail of quickly drying pee was doing just that.

There in the dark, gray, almost dingy light, at the bottom of the stairs, Nancy found a sign. It read: "PLAY PLACE! NO GROWN-UPS ALLOWED!" The balled up diaper just by the door was a pretty good clue.

Good that someone had at least changed her. Wasn't it?

Ignoring the sign, Nancy stepped forward and opened the door and went in. Turning and taking her, she placed her back to another door, this one made of glass. An old yellowed room decorated with the tattered remains of children's crayon scribbles laid behind her. But Nancy paid it little mind.

What caught Nancy's attention was the simple, moth eaten curtain in front of her. Nancy felt it call to her, invited her. With a singular swift motion, she tore back the barrier. Just as promised, an indoor playground lay behind it; perfect for a child to frolic and get lost in.

Stepping forward past the curtain, she heard the door softly click behind her; so soft that part of Nancy wouldn't have been surprised to look back and find that the door didn't exist. There was a kind of heat here; one of energy and motion. It was the same kind of heat from a gym; where no matter how high the AC was turned up, people's bodies were radiating energy. Same might be true for an indoor playground.

"Tina?" Nancy called out, stepping from the solid concrete and onto the metal mesh of the playground. Such a dark playground, too. Impossible darkness above and below. No more ceiling, just monkey bars and gymnast rings.

Her voice did not carry like she'd hoped it would, and she only got the sound of raspy breathing in reply. That, and the same off feeling of some unseen force watching her. Not like this morning after breakfast either; more like the feeling she'd gotten just before Tina's bed stopped being a bed.

No more walls in this place either, just play-tunnels and slides and tubes. Old ones, from the looks of them. Nails and old screws jutted out at odd angles from improper construction and overuse. Nothing like this would ever get past a safety inspector today.

"Tina?" Nancy called out, her voice with a hint of hope in it. Please let her be here. Please let her be here.

The place had a low thrumming noise, like a heartbeat. Unseen through the vast network of plastic arteries, children crawled and scurried through. No laughter though. No calls of 'Tag! You're It!'. Other than the occasional rattle of a body moving through thick plastic, the kids were quiet deathly quiet.

Maybe not kids, Nancy thought. She looked around. This place was big enough to accommodate adults...or at least children her size. Tina's size.

Nancy stopped; her eyes being drawn to the sound of the raspy breathing. "T-Tina?" She no longer sounded (or felt) quite so hopeful. When the scarred witch with the red and green bag stepped out of the shadows, Nancy knew she had every right not to be.

"Who are you?"

A devilish smile blossomed across the disfigured face. Nancy washed as the woman opened up her white blouse and exposed her nipple. As if in answer, the ghoulish woman kneaded her breast slightly. That wasn't milk coming out of her nipple. Milk wasn't green. And the laughter that came out of her wasn't human.

The woman rebuttoned her blouse and opened the bag slung over her shoulder. Even at a distance, Nancy could see something white, rectangular and folded peaking out. She didn't need two guesses to know what it was. A jagged, splintery paddle held overhead, the monster woman slowly advanced on Nancy, her square heels clicking on the metal; her intent clear.

A paddle, and a diaper bag. First one. Then the other. Nancy quickly pivoted and peeled back the curtain, finding only cement walls to block her path. She jukeed and ran sideways, deeper into one of the playground's walkways. Even though she sprinted, she somehow knew she wasn't getting away. Even though the undead Mary Poppins followed at a slow, leisurely pace, Nancy couldn't help but feel as if a cold chill was breathing down her neck at every twist and turn she took.

No time to think. No time to plan. Just move and turn. Move and turn. Left or right. It didn't matter.

Sometimes things just worked like that...

Such a weird logic. Nancy didn't normally think like this. Not when she was awake anyways.

Nancy had been correct in one thing, though; it didn't matter which way she turned. A dead end found her; and right on her heels, still walking at the same knowing, predatory pace, was the woman with the paddle rounded the corner.

She cackled with glee and dragged the paddle along the ground, letting its low thudding scraping sound join the hum of the playing children. She gave it a practice swing and a low whoosh went through the air.

"Gonna get you," the shadowed hag taunted. Closer she came, as if savoring every moment. "Nanny's gonna get you!" Her words were playful, her tone was not.

Back against the wall and with nowhere else to go, Nancy realized why she'd been acting so strangely.

Things DIDN'T just work like that. Not when she was awake!

"IT'S ONLY A DREAM!" she screamed.

It was as defiant as it was desperate, and did nothing to stop the woman with the paddle. She'd paused and looked down at the carpet bag filled with diapers, apparently savoring the moment and envisioning what was to come. "Come to Nanny..." she beckoned.

No! Not like this! Not like this!

Filled with frustration, the young woman's anger overcame her fear. "GODDAMN YOU!"

She got only puckered lips and blown kisses for her shrieking.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of the play-tunnels. Old and rickety, with rusted screws and nails sticking out still from either wear and tear or improper manufacture. Necessity being the mother invention, it gave Nancy an idea. If this was a dream. If this really was a dream then...

Without thinking or deliberation she slapped her arm on the nearest piece of jagged, crying out in pain as the rusted metal pierced her flesh.

"AAAAAAAAAAAH!" Now her voice echoed along the empty structure, deafening out all other sounds as the nail tore open her flesh. It was a little cut, but it hurt like something else.

"NAUGHTY!" The woman cried out. Her paddle dropped to the grated floor. A burnt hand reached out to grab her "BE CAREFU-!"

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"NO! NO! NO! NO!"

Nancy was in hysterics! She stood up from her desk and thrashed her arms, flailing and screaming at her attacker; even as the rest of her class turned around in their seats and stared in amazement at her. "I'M NOT A BABY! I'M NOTTA-!"

She didn't open her eyes, even then. It wasn't until Mrs. Morgan rushed and grabbed her by the shoulders that she opened them. "OK! OK! THOMPSON!" Her last name! Children didn't get called by their surnames. Nancy froze; fully awake and the center of attention. "I'll-I'll call your mother." Nancy kept her eyes on her teacher, slowly starting to catch her breath. "Everything is alright now."

Wordlessly, Mrs. Morgan tried to guide Nancy back to her desk. Nancy planted her feet and backed away. "No," she said. Even as she did it, she started to pick up her books and collect her back pack. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"I'm fine."

Again, her teacher asked, "You're sure?" Not quite believing her. It was fair.

"Yeah," Nancy repeated. "I'll go straight home." It took everything in her not to break down and cry right there in front of everyone. Somehow, Nancy found the strength.

Somehow, her teacher seemed just as shook. "You'll need a h-hall pass." Nancy ignored her and walked out the door, this time turning towards the exit instead of going deeper into the school. She really didn't want to know if there were stairs further down the hall and to the right; yet alone where they led to.

Just outside the school, right past the steps of the front entrance, Nancy let out a sob. She couldn't say whether it was from fear or relief; not that it mattered.

A dream. It had all been a dream. Just a dream.

But if it was 'just' a dream; why did she have a cut on her forearm right where she'd slammed it against the metal?

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That afternoon, the holding cell was cold and hard, but not sterile. There was a feeling of dingy, almost moldy wetness in the air, even though not a trace of the stuff could be seen or smelled. It had all the cold and clinical feelings with none of the safe sterility. The bars were a kind of graying green. How odd, Nancy thought, that something meant to confine and restrict would be the same color as the Statue of Liberty. Looking at each other through opposite ends of the bars, Nancy and Rod spoke in quiet hushed tones as the bored guard went to take a dump.

"And then what happened?" Nancy asked.

"I told you," Rod said. "It was dark but I'm sure there was somebody else in there." Rod sounded tired and exasperated. The police interrogators had probably asked him the same questions. The only difference was that the cops in no way believed that a hundred and twenty pound B-Cup wearing Tina Gray was more than a year old.

"How could somebody be in there without you knowing about it? Exasperated as she was, Nancy knew the truth. She just didn't believe it herself. In some wild way she was hoping poor stupid Rod could do it for her. "The door was locked."

"How the fuck should I know?" Rod was equally perplexed and considering he was being charged with kidnapping (among other things) he was infinitely more frustrated. "I don't expect you to believe me anyway." He retreated to the back of his cell and stared at the stainless steel toilet.



“What did he look like?” She leaned up against the bars. “Did you get a good look at him?”

Rod looked up and back around at Nancy. “No,” he said. He sounded more than a little sad. Anger and regret and exhaustion all blending together into a terrible cocktail.

Nancy felt her frustration bubbling up. She whacked the bars, a fussy toddler in her crib, and started pacing. She was on the right side of the cell door but still felt trapped. “Then how do you know somebody else was there?!”

“Because somebody spanked her while I watched.” Rod moved back to the door and leaned in as far as the iron would let him.

Nancy crossed her arms, not looking directly at her best friend’s boyfriend. “And you didn’t even get a good look at him?”

“I couldn’t even see the fucker.” He shuddered at the memory. “I could just see it happening. Hear the smack. See her diaper flatten out in the back with the paddle.”

Paddle?” Nancy looked right at him. “What do you mean?”

Rod’s voice went hollow, a tinge of fear in his voice. “My old man used to spank us,” he said, “before we learned how to throw a punch. My baby brother, too. I know the difference between a hand, a belt, and a paddle. The sound, the mark, the pain. This was a paddle. It was a big one, too. Rectangle, like they do at Frats or the movies or whatever. The kind that hits you down there but really knocks the wind outta ya.”

His eyes came back to the present and he looked at Nancy. “You know, I probably could’ve saved her.” His voice cracked. “But I thought it was just another nightmare...like the one I had the night before.”

Nancy didn’t speak. Nancy just listened.

“There was this...” he hesitated. “There was this lady. She had this huge paddle; more like a club, really. It was too big, but she carried it around one handed, like it was easy. Like it was a toy.”

Nancy’s skin began to crawl. This sounded familiar. Too familiar. Far too familiar. Just like what Tina had been talking about last night. Just like what Nancy had dreamed. And Rod had neither been around nor been told about either of those.

On the verge of hyperventilating, Nancy started to walk away, towards the door back out to the police station proper. “Hey,” Rod called out, sounding weary. “Do you think I did it?”

Just before she banged on the door to be let out, Nancy told him the truth. “No.”

It didn't make either one of them feel better.

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The water was hot in the tub that evening. Hot enough to boil a lobster. Hot enough to cauterize the already scabbing over scratch on Nancy's arm. Hot enough to destroy all the aches in her body from a perpetually bizarre day.

Nancy lay there up to her neck in the clear hot water, her head propped up by a bath pillow.

“Ten, nine, better watch your behind,” she sang in tired lackadaisical whisper. She turned the washcloth over her in hands, her eyes half closed. She wasn't washing herself as much as wringing the thing like a wet teddy bear. “Eight, seven, gonna learn your lesson.” Such a weird little jump rope song. It seemed oddly appropriate, somehow.

Strange how dreams and reality so often lined up.

“Six, five, never gonna thrive.” Thrive. A fancy two dollar world meaning grow and mature. Funny considering she'd been dreaming about strange women carrying around paddles and diaper bags.

Tina wasn't thriving anymore...

Nancy only half-knew it, but she was putting herself into a kind of trance. The rhythmic sing-song nature of it all becoming a kind of lullabye. “Four, three, in your pants you pee.” When she was younger that seemed like the funniest part; as if peeing your pants could be scary...

“Two, one, Nanny says you're done....” Her eyes were closed. The last line coming out as barely a mumble.

She'd sang the old jump rope rhyme to calm her nerves. And it had worked. The tub held her like a hammock or a cradle;, and the water covered her and kept her warm like a blanket.

Nancy laid there, still, in the tub. She breathed steady, shallow breaths as she dozed in the tub. Her stomach moved up and down below the water, and she began to lightly snore, not yet dreaming.

If she had been dreaming, it wouldn't have been of the hand racing up from the tub's drain. Had she been awake she would have noticed the scarred digits reaching for the washcloth lightly clutched in her hand...

A knock on the door. Nancy's eyes snapped open. It hadn't been long, not nearly long enough. The water was exactly the same temperature as when she'd closed her eyes. Funny thing about sleep; a moment could feel a millennium and vice versa.

"Nancy?" A familiar and nagging voice called through the bathroom door.

Nancy grumbled and then spoke up. "What, Mother?"

"Don't fall asleep in there," Mom warned. "You could drown, you know."

The young woman rolled her eyes. "Oh for Pete's sake." In the quiet acoustics of the bathroom, even her mumbblings could be heard. She picked up the washcloth again and wrung it in her hands if only to do something with her hands and add the gentle dripping to the room's soundtrack.

She looked askance between her legs in the tub. Had that rubber duck always been there?

"It happens all the time," Mom insisted. "I've heated up some warm milk."

"Warm milk?" Nancy repeated, her upper lip curling in disgust. "Gross." What did Mom think she was? A baby? She instantly regretted thinking of it in those terms.

Mom's footsteps faded slowly away as she gave Nancy a hint more of privacy. With a breath that started out as an annoyed huff and ended as a weary sigh, Nancy closed her eyes. One. Last. Ti-

The shriek of fright she let out was muffled by the water. Down she went into the tub as two hands yanked her down by the hips.

Down.

Down!

DOWN!

Down further than it was possible in a simple bathtub, Nancy went. Instinctively, she kicked towards the sources, with those horrible hands pulling her farther and farther down.

Not just those hands, either. More than one pair was grabbing her; caressing her; violating her. "Ah-ah-ah!" A voice from the depths chided. "Can't go to bed dirty!"

She couldn't breathe! She couldn't see, either. Still terribly warm, the water now clouded with soap. Soap in her eyes! Oh how they burned! How they stung! With near Herculean strength she breached the surface, stealing a gasp of air before being pulled back down. "HELP!"

Her eyes hurt. Soapy water rushed up her nose. She opened her mouth to scream and tasted suds. It was as if she were trapped under ice, with only a narrow porthole shining the light from her bathroom. The rest was incredibly dark, and from the dark came the hands; groping and probing.

There were more than just hands in the water dragging her down. Wet, scrubbing fabric dragged across her skin. Washcloths! She was being drowned. She was being bathed. Either way, she was in a panic. Either way, she was being violated.

Her left arm was the only thing to breach the surface. Only by pounding on the sides of the tub and up against the near wall of the bathroom did Nancy have even the faintest recognition of still being in her own home. Only by that left arm did she have a hope of rescue.

All the while down in the darkness, washcloths and hands that should not be scrubbed at her. In and behind her ears. Up and down her arms and breasts. Underneath her armpits “HE-!” When she managed to breach again she wasted her breath screamin. Nancy could have sworn she felt the teeth of a fine toothed comb brushing out her hair for her.

Pounding so far away, coming from the bathroom door. Not nearly as loud as the pounding in Nancy’s head. The washcloths worked their way up and down her legs, and in her most vulnerable and intimate of places.

“Almost...” The voice whispered from the darkness.

Water still steaming hot, the washcloths withdrew as suddenly as they had advanced on her. “MOMMY!” Nancy screamed, her voice scratchy and hoarse; her mouth tasting of soap.

“Hold on, baby!” Mom called through the door.

An amphibian wriggling up on land, Nancy managed to claw her way out of the tub. She grabbed a towel and draped it over her shoulders just as Mom picked the lock on the door. “I’m okay!” she said when Mom burst in. “I’m okay.” The mirror was too steamed up to see her reflection, but even Nancy didn’t need to see her face to know that she was lying. “I’m okay.”

“But I heard you screaming,” Mom said. “I heard you calling me.”

“It’s okay,” Nancy lied. “I just...I just slipped getting out of the tub.” She didn’t resist as her mother took the bathrobe off the hook and started draping it over Nancy’s shoulders; removing the towel and guiding her arms through the sleeves, just like when she was a child who couldn’t dress herself.

“I told you,” Mom said, tying up the belt around Nancy’s waste. “Hundreds of people a year, dear.”

"I know," Nancy panted. "I know. You were right."

That little acknowledgement seemed to satisfy her mother. "I'll go turn down your bed for you."

"Okay," Nancy nodded. Her voice was still shaky. "I'll put on my pajamas."

"Okay." And then she was alone.

Nancy shivered. She was cold. Getting out of a hot bath, she was always a little chilly as her skin adjusted to the rapid shift in temperatures, but there was something different this time. Her skin felt funny.

On a kind of dread intuition she opened the robe and examined herself. She had no body hair. Anywhere. None on or under her arms. None below the waist, on or between her legs. No stubble or even the vaguest hint of a root.

Completely smooth.

Baby smooth.

To a degree, it was as if Nancy had never hit puberty. Or like it had all been scrubbed off like stubborn dirt in the bathtub. A sense of foreboding reminded Nancy of the tub. She turned to the tub.

She hadn't put that rubber ducky there. Nancy didn't even own a rubber ducky since she was three. And she definitely didn't take bubble baths. There it was though, in all of its lavender scented glory: a tub brimming with bubbles.

Ten...nine...better watch your behind....

Nancy backed away and opened the bathroom medicine cabinet.. She reached in and took the pill bottle from the bottom shelf. "STA AWAKE (Fast Acting)." It read. She spared one last look at her body; another at the tub; and then downed double the recommended dosage.

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"The all consuming act of bodily dismemberment-" The T.V. in Nancy's bedroom droned on. "NOOOOOOOOO!" The woman in the horror movie screamed while her arms were ripped from their sockets and corn syrup blood gushed out from her torso.

Nancy lay in bed, struggling to stay awake; trying desperately to stare at the screen instead of the back of her head or the inside of her eyelids. The warm milk was doing nothing to put her to sleep, but the anti-sleeping pills could only do so much against her exhaustion.

And her bed was comfortable.

And unlike Tina, Nancies jammies didn't have snaps along the inseam, nor did she crinkle when she moved. So much easier to just...

She had texted Glenn, just so she could have someone to talk to and got no response back. He was probably grounded. Her freakout this morning in English had stopped her from getting to talk to her boyfriend. She worried about him and how he was coping with all the strange.

More importantly, it was harder to go to sleep when you had someone to talk to.

After almost drowning in the tub, and the not so pleasant nap this morning, sleep wasn't exactly something Nancy craved.

With no other options, horror movies became the last resort. The screaming and the blood, no matter how schlocky had always given her the creeps, given her trouble sleeping...given her reason to stay awake.

In a weird way she was fighting bad dreams with nightmare fuel.

Sadly, as her lids started to droop, threatening to weld themselves shut, even the nightmare fuel was running out of gas. Her head started to nod, just a bit. It would be okay. Just a quick nap...a cat nap. Not even a cat nap, a kitten na-....

NO!

For what might have been the third or the dozenth time (she'd lost count), Nancy startled herself awake, forcing herself to stare at the old horror movie. Even the blood curdling screams and the sounds of chainsaws were becoming a kind of lullaby to the poor girl.

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UP! UP! UP!

Nancy sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Must not lay down! Must not sleep! She grabbed the remote and turned off her T.V. Maybe an eerie silence would help her stay conscious better than a grisly melody...

Clad in pure white, she sat and huffed, chiding herself. This was stupid. She was acting like a child, afraid of monsters under the bed, (though that thought made her careful of her feet).

Even the bathtub was more bad dream than reality. Her body hair? There was a logical explanation for that. She did like to keep a clean shop so to speak. Maybe she hadn't lost it all as much as she'd just done a really good job of shaving...and forgot.

But when she'd asked her mother about it, just before bed, all Mom had said was "You're just a late bloomer, sweetie," before giving her a kiss on the forehead and ensuring that she'd

chugged down a glass of dairy. THAT was an unexpected reaction...

Rubbing herself out of nerves and the strange smoothness of her own skin, Nancy got up out of bed and walked over to her bedroom window. Maybe some fresh air would help her stay awake.

Gently sliding the window open, Nancy poked her head out and stared down at the neighborhood from her second story window.

"Hi..." a voice from the night whispered.

It was only Nancy's deep familiarity with Glenn's voice and his silhouette's complete dissimilarity from the woman in Nancy's dreams that saved him from a shove that would have sent him plummeting to the lawn below.

The young woman drew back, swallowing her scream into a gasp as her boyfriend poked his head through. "I'm sorry, I saw your light was on. I wanted to check on you to see how you were."

"Do you know how much I sometimes wish you didn't live right across the street." Her tone was biting, her heart was pounding, but for the first time all day she felt something akin to relief.

Glenn must've sensed it, too. "Will you shut up and let me in?" he asked. "Did you ever stand on a rose trellis in your bare feet."

Of course he'd sneak all the way over in his pajamas and bare feet...

"Just get inside before somebody sees you."

Glenn clambered in through her window. Romeo on the balcony he wasn't. More like an old boxer trying to climb between the ropes. He cried out a little as his pricked his feet on a wayward thorn. "Ow!"

"Shhh!"

"What? They hurt?"

"You gotta be quiet, Mom's not even asleep yet." Once he was inside, Nancy closed the window behind him.

Laying there in his pajama bottoms and a gray sweatshirt, Glenn seemed to make himself very comfortable on Nancy's bed while she closed her bedroom door; lest Mom see something she wasn't supposed to.

It was stupid, presumptuous, and cocky...and it made Nancy feel at least five times better. Glenn being a bit of a horndog was infinitely more normal than the last twenty-four hours.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

Glenn seemed disappointed, but not terribly surprised. He slid off the bed and took a seat on an old wicker chair next to it. “So I heard you had a freakout in English class today.”

Nancy sat back down on her mattress. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“You haven’t slept yet, have you?”

“Not really.”

He reached over and noticed the cut on her left arm; the same arm that had managed to pull herself up from drowning in the bathtub. “How’d you get that?”

“I cut myself in English class.”

“Like with a razor?”

Flashes of the sharp edged piece of shrapnel poking out from warped playground equipment appeared in Nancy’s mind’s eye. “No.”

Glenn didn’t seem to have any further questions. Just more worried looks.

The young lady grabbed a mirror and looked in her reflection. She looked tired. So tired. Her face sagged at the edges. Her cheeks looked puffy, chubby almost. She thought about her mother declaring her a ‘late bloomer’.

“God, I look like I’m four.” She really did. Mom had mountains of photos saved on a drive from Nancy’s childhood. More than a few of them had a pre-kindergarten girl making pouty faces just before naptime. She put the mirror down and looked back to her boyfriend. “Did you have any weird dreams last night?”

“Slept like a rock,” he replied. The answer was too fast. Too sure.

Nancy kept digging. “Do you believe that people can dream about what’s going to happen?”

“No.” Again, too fast. Too sure. This was a conversation that Glenn had had with himself ahead of time; like preparing for a job interview, or confession.

“Do you believe in the boogeyman?” Flat heeled boots and ruffled blouses blinked in Nancy’s brain. “Or boogeywoman?”



“No.” Glenn didn’t sound convinced of himself this time. “I talked with my folks. Maybe Tina always was...like that...and we just never noticed. Rod tried to kidnap her...or worse...you know that.”

It wasn’t an admission; quite the opposite. But rather than the self-assured gaslighting coming from her mom and dad, that obvious bold-faced-lie of denial actually helped Nancy. It gave her confidence in her own experiences and senses.

“I’ve got a crazy favor to ask you.”

Glenn knew the look in Nancy’s eyes. “Uh-oh.”

Nancy leaned forward. “I’m going to go look for someone. I just need you to stay here. Stand guard.”

Not nearly as dumb as Rod, Glenn connected the dots. “Okay. Deal.”

“Turn off the light.”

Glenn did. Nancy saw a perverted little smirk as he switched off the lamp. “And it’s not what you’re thinking...”

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It was late when Nancy finally managed to sneak out of her house. So late the crickets had gone to sleep. Every light in the house, save the front porch, was out. Still barefoot so that her footfalls were as light as possible, and still in her pajamas, the highschool senior snuck out onto an otherwise empty street.

The street shouldn’t have been so empty. The ground, not so soft on the soles of her feet. The animals, not so quiet. The air, not so warm and cozy. Almost as if on some level, Nancy knew she was still asleep in her bed.

Almost...

Sometimes things just worked like that...

A quick turn of the corner, and she was near Tina’s house. It didn’t matter that Tina lived much further away, certainly more than. Nancy was passing by her old friend’s backyard where they’d spent so many childhood days playing with dollies or tea sets. The old playhouse was still there in the yard, she noticed. Even the dark, that house looked far newer than it should have. Even the dark the house looked far older than Nancy knew it to be...

Feeling ill at ease, Nancy looked behind her to the pristine streets of her own block. “Glenn?”

she called out softly. "Are you still watching?"

Out from behind a tree, Glenn glided onto the sidewalk. "Yeah?" he said. "So?" He sounded impatient. Irritated.

"Just checking," Nancy whispered. Though she didn't know why she did. No one was around to hear either of them. A voice in her head, her own, prodded her on. She wasn't here for Tina, she told herself. She couldn't save Tina.

She could still make sure Rod was okay.

Slowly she walked forward as her boyfriend took his post behind the tree; looking around warily as a dog barked somewhere in the distance. A few more steps into the night fantastique, past burned out and decaying buildings, and Nancy was at the police station.

Her mind instantly glossed over that this too should be impossible. But she'd gone there so many times throughout her life, she knew the way like the back of her hand. Even on foot, though the way might be long and tedious, she could make her way to Daddy's Job in her sleep.

Picking up her pace, Nancy jogged over to where the holding cells were, just to the right of the stair entranceway. Through meshed windows, not unlike a playpen, she peered to see the modern day Greaser, asleep in his bed.

Safe. Likely uncomfortable on the holding cell's cot. But safe. Nancy relaxed a little bit as he rolled over from his side and began to suck his thumb. Sleeping like a...

A banging sound from within the station's cell and the squeaking squeal of hinges that desperately needed oiling caught Nancy's attention. The door to the holding cells opened. Nancy's breath stopped, hiding inside her lungs than to come and face the open air.

The intruder's face was burned and boney, angular like a witches with texture comparable to raw meat. The dead flowers in her dirty brown sunhat seemed to drain the color from the room instead of add to it. The flats of her heels click-clocked on the cold pavement of the cells. Still, Rod did not stir.

Looking down into the basement level, Nancy still had the advantage. She could see the witch-thing, the scarred beldam but the woman with the paddle slung over one shoulder and dirty green and red diaper bag over the other could not see her.

Nancy turned her head. "GLENN!" She called. Her voice was loud but remained calm. Glenn did not appear. "GLENN?" a hint of doubt crept in. A smidgen of fear. Nancy looked down into the cells and watched as the disfigured wenched walked straight through the bars and into Rod's cell. The iron bars did not block her way. They might as well have been patches of

shadow on her ruffled blouse and striped bow tie.

The girl banged on the windows. “ROD!” The boy did not stir. “ROD! WATCH OUT!” He only laid there and sucked his thumb while the horrid woman peeled back his blanket and unbuttoned his pants.

“ROD! Watch out!”

The bizarre babysitter looked up at Nancy from the cell, a knowing smile on her face. A dark laughter as she set her bag down.

“GLENN!”

The young woman screamed and pounded. “ROD! WAKE UP! GLENN!” The monster beside the bed didn’t even break her stride, opening the bag and removing wipes, powder, and a diaper far too big for any actual baby to need.

“GLENN!” Where was he? He was supposed to be standing guard! When she looked back down into the cell, unable to completely ignore the perversion going on, she saw Rod. Rod. And only Rod. The meathead’s eyes opened and he sat up, slowly looking around, confused by the presence of his thumb in his mouth. Nancy’s voice was back to full shriek. “GLENN!” .

Glenn did not answer. “Nanceeeeeeeee...” Not ten feet away, all by herself, was Tina, standing up but swaddled like a newborn. Nancy stood up, confused and shocked. Tina couldn’t be here. Tina wouldn’t walk. Tina couldn’t talk.

“NANCEEEEE!” Tina’s voice sounded impossible distant. The echo of her former adult self. The big baby’s lips didn’t move in time. Instead, they parted, and slowly, very slowly, Tina began to vomit.

It wasn’t even vomit, that mixture of breast milk and strained peas. When a baby did it, it was just called spit-up. Nancy turned her back to the wall and edged along the police station’s property, not daring to take her eyes off the disgusting sight in front of her. Bundled up Tina just watched Nancy with infantile curiosity as something thick and disgusting pooled at her feet.

Someone needed a diaper change.

This couldn’t be real! This wasn’t real!

“GLENN!” the high school senior shouted out into the night. “WAKE UP!” she called. No response, save the gurgling noises from Tina as her stomach ejected all of its contents. This wasn’t real. This wasn’t real. She was in her bed at home! Glenn was watching, waiting for her to stir. If she screamed loud enough, the real her might at least mumble something in her bed.

“ARE YOU THERE?!”

“I’m here, little one.” It wasn’t Glenn’s voice. Not even close. “PEEKABOO!” From the shadows, the witch came and Nancy ran like the Devil Herself was at her heels.

Faster! She ran! Faster! But her legs felt like they had weights in them. So much running. So little progress.

“HEEEEE-HEEEEE-HEEEEE-HEEEEE!”

It was just like when she was a child playing tag. It didn’t matter how fast she pumped her legs, the bigger, older kids, always caught up to her. Her five fastest strides were two medium steps to the tallest kids. Her sprints were barely a jog to the grown-ups; and so it felt here.

Back! Back to her house! Her safe space! Her refuge! She’d started her dream there, and so it could end here.

That’s how it worked, right? Sometimes, at least...

Skin goose pimpled with cold sweat, Nancy opened the door to her home and slammed the door behind her; locking it and sparing only a glance. Maybe this was it. Maybe she was safe. Here in her own home. Wolves roamed outside the door. Not inside the house.

Three steps up, the staircase turned to tapioca pudding beneath her feet. Nancy dropped down half a foot, her ankle caught in the vat. The next step had just as much give. The door thundered and shook on its hinges. From the outside, Nancy heard the telltale sound of a key being inserted, and tumblers making way.

A key! The witch had a key!

“NAUGHTY....NAUGHTY...” The door opened and the grinning maniac walked in. “You’re far too little to walk like that, sweetie! Be good for Nanny!” Nancy scrambled up the steps, crawling on her hands and knees the rest of the way up the stairs. The stairs held. Nancy’s appreciation for the irony didn’t.

“GLEEEEEEEEEENN!” Hopping like a monkey, Nancy screamed all the way into her bedroom. She closed the door behind her; anything to put one more layer between her and the Mary Poppins from Hell. “GLENN!” There on the door, in her bedroom mirror’s reflection, Glenn sat slumped over, asleep in the wicker chair he’d set up guard in. He was motionless, oblivious to her screaming.

“This is just a dream, this isn’t real!” Nancy said, remembering Glenn’s supposed trick. “None of this is real! This is just a dream! She isn’t real, she ISN’T-!”

The shattering glass of her mirror sounded real enough. The jagged, splintered paddle that sent the shards careening into the air looked real enough. The hag tackling her, cackling in glee as she yanked Nancy around by the hips seemed real enough.

Nancy screamed until her throat hurt, while the cackling monster pulled her over knee and went to yank her pajama bottoms down. Nancy clawed at the carpet, squirming out of her bedtime pants in a futile effort to remain unspanked. This only seemed to amuse the female fiend.

“GLENN!”

Even as she clawed and kicked and did her everything to protect herself, Glenn snoozed away in his own little dreamworld. With nothing else to protect herself, she grabbed a pillow off her bed. One swing from the passive club later, and Nancy was holding onto nothing more than cotton stuffing.

“GLENN! NOOOOO!”

RRRRRRRRRIIIIIING!

Glenn sat up with a start. Nancy did too, now fully awake in her bed as the alarm clock she’d set ‘just in case’ rang to life. Nancy turned it off and looked around the room. Her room. Her very mature. Very adult room.

As her boyfriend rubbed the sleep from his eyes, Nancy peaked under her bed covers. Her pajama bottoms were gone. So were her panties. Where she’d gone to bed in dry underwear, she woke up in damp Goodnites.

“Glenn...you bastard...”

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“Glenn...you bastard...” She was in a cold sweat; her pajamas soaked. More than just sweat, her underwear was wet too. Somehow her panties had been downgraded into Goodnites; bed wetting pants. Did that mean that she was a bedwetter now in the same way that Tina was a pants wetter? Nancy chased the thought out of her mind and focused all of her anger over at her boyfriend.

Glenn blinked, confused. “What did I do?” He sat up a little more in the chair where he’d taken up his vigil.

“I just asked you to do one thing,” she held back a sob, mutating fear into fury. “Just stay awake and watch me and wake me up if it looked like I was having a bad dream.” Her voice was just above a whisper; her tone just beneath a roar. “And what did you do, you shithead?” She slapped him on the knee; afraid to lean over further and expose her disposable bedwetting panties. “You fell asleep...”

“Nancy...?” Mom’s voice came from down the hall, her voice muted by the door.

Glenn and Nancy exchanged panicked looks. Glenn practically leapt out the chair and climbed back through the window. Nancy tore the bedsheets off and followed him. Dignity be damned, if they got caught alone in Nancy’s room, she’d have bigger problems than some pissy padding between her thighs.

“Stay here,” she whispered to him out on the trellis. Just as she closed the door, Nancy saw his eyes dart down to below her waist; saw her boyfriend’s eyes go wide with something besides lust. “Don’t go away.” In a weird way, his look of shock and disgust was something of a blessing. At least he knew something was wrong with it.

Mom? She’d care more about there being a boy in her room.

A few hurried steps and Nancy was back in bed, under the covers of her comforter; just in time for Mom to open the door and turn on the lights. She was in her nightgown and bathrobe; having gone to sleep before Nancy’s own screaming had woken her. “You okay?” she asked.

Nervous and shaken, Nancy peeked her head out, her chin just above the comforter. “Yeah, I’m okay,” she lied. “I just had a bad dream, I’m going right back to sleep.” She was tempted to add “I promise” but that might have been laying it on too thick.

Nancy knew her little fib had worked when her mother’s shoulders slumped a bit in relief. “Okay,” Mom told her. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Nancy Nodded. “Okay.”

Mom turned the lights back off. “And if you’re wet you might wanna change your Goodnite. Might make it easier to get back to sleep if you’re dry.”

“I’m dry...” Another lie.

“Okay...” From the tone of Mom’s voice, not one she believed, but she closed Nancy’s bedroom door anyways.

At least she didn’t peel back the sheets to check. Nancy wouldn’t have known what to do if that happened.

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They stole Glenn’s car pack and drove it straight to the police station. Unlike her dream, the police station was only close by automobile. Nancy threw on a clean pair of underwear and some jeans. She chose not to think about how there was now a waste basket filled with one or two wet Goodnites in the bathroom.

Glenn barely had time to throw his school jacket over his pajamas. "You mind tellin' me what's goin' on?" He asked as they sprinted up the stairs of the police office.

How to explain to someone that you'd just had a semi-prophectic dream and you wanted to make sure that your friend was still technically an adult? "Just trust me," Nancy said.

They burst through the door and to the front desk like they owned the place. "Garcia," Nancy said to the cop on duty. "I want to see Rod Lane again." There were perks to being the Lieutenant's daughter; like being able to casually call officers by their last name.

Garcia wiped his forehead and smoothed his hair. "Y'know, I took the night shift so I could get some peace and quiet," he whined.

Nancy slammed her palms on the table. "LOOK, IT'S URGENT!"

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Rod Lane slept like the newly dead. He'd woken up once, a strange feeling of heebie jeebies; of something creeping up on him. But he's gone right back to sleep after a false start. Just a nightmare. Nothing more. Nothing that could hurt him.

So much had happened today and tonight, so much batshit crazy, that it was easy for Rod to go back to sleep. He really needed the rest. He'd need more rest, too. He was alone right now but eventually he'd end up surrounded by a lot of dudes a lot meaner than him. Ones who wouldn't buy that he was being framed for a crime that he hadn't commit, that his girlfriend was really his girlfriend a little over twenty four hours ago.

So he slept. Alone. The bars made him feel safe. Secure. It was easy to sleep, to escape from the horror of the waking world. So easy, in fact, that his body didn't notice the sheets slowly taken off him. Rod didn't stir when his pants practically shimmied themselves off his hips and dropped to the floor.

He kept right on snoring as his boxers ripped themselves off, tearing at the sides. He even sucked his thumb as a diaper- Parent's Choice- seemed to manifest from under his bed and slide itself beneath his naked bottom.

The giant diaper taped on, his bladder went on autopilot, the yellow color changing line turning a light blue as it emptied itself into the baby's garment. Gently, still half asleep, he rubbed the front of the padding, his dick getting hard at the familiar sensation of being encased in warm wetness...even if the stimulus was caused by something very different than he was used to.

Soon enough that stimulus would be much more common and pervasive; but he didn't know that. He just knew that he frowned a little bit when a strong but tender hand moved his free hand away, so that his shirt turned onesie could be buttoned up over the wet diaper.

The jacket he'd been arrested in remained unaltered: A giant baby greaser. He didn't notice.

Not until the sheets started to wrap around him, slithering threading themselves between his legs: wrapping themselves snugly around his chest; twisting and knotting themselves up at the ends to resemble ropes. Not until he heard the cooing laughter of a witchy woman. Not until he was drug out of bed...

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"Look," Glenn said in his best I'm-also-an-adult-and-a-concerned-citizen-voice, "we have reason to believe that something very strange is going on here."

Lt. Thompson leaned out of his office doorway. "I got no argument with that."  
A jolt of surprise. Hard to use her father's authority to get what she wanted when her father was right there to contradict her.

"Daddy, what are you doing here?"

The lieutenant stepped out of his office, all business. "There's a strange case involving attempted kidnapping," he said. "And I don't like strange cases, including ones that my daughter is mixed up in." He didn't let up. "What are you doing here? At this hour you should be home in bed."

There's a strange effect that parents can have on a person. Even when that person is a grown adult, we all become that scared, emotional, frustrated, eager to please child when we're around the people who raised us. "I just want to see if he's okay," she let an ounce of pleading creep into her voice.

"Nancy," Garcia chimed in. "Take my word for it, the guy's sleeping like a baby." That's what Nancy was afraid of. "He's not going anywhere."

"Just go down and look at him," Nany urged. Her voice was soft and tired. "Please, Daddy." Even when the person begging you is an adult; if they're your kid that instinct and desire to protect, shelter, and comfort them rears up from time to time.

Lt. Thompson sighed. "Alright...Garcia, give me the keys."

Garcia started to fumble around in the front desk drawer. "Where the hell did I put the keys?"

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"HELP!" Rod screamed as he was dragged to the floor. "HEEEEEEEELP!" He grabbed at the bed railing, but to no avail. The force that was yanking him. Pulling on the bed sheets was impossibly strong. It might as well have been an industrial crane pulling him along the cold cement floor. He didn't stay on the floor for long, however.



Up. Up. Up.

He kicked and thrashed, pulling at his bonds, but the sheets were too tight around his midsection. “HEEEEEELP! SOMEBODY HELP!” His screams and pleas were cut short. Not because he couldn’t breathe- the sheets were mostly bundled up between his legs, but because he suddenly realized why his legs felt so cold and why his pants were so squishy.

Up. Up. Up. Barely standing, his bow legged tip toes just scraping the floor as his bonds attached themselves to the ceiling, suspending him in the air. Leaving him the perfect target.

WHAP!

The last of Rod Lane’s manhood ended up absorbed by the front of his Walmart Store Brand Diaper, as did the last of his sanity.

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“JESUS!” Nancy was screaming before the door to the holding cell was all the way open. Her own screams mixed well with the wails of little Roddy; his fists balled up and shaking impotently.

The bars to his cell were no longer iron, but wooden, with little whirling toys and abacus bead counters installed at eye level- if eye level went no higher than someone standing on their knees.

“ROD! NO!”

“Okay!” Lt. Thompson barked, “Get him down! Get him down from there!” The two officers did their best to disentangle the baby-man from the giant jumper made out of off-white bedsheets. Rod was decidedly unhappy.

The cot that had been Rod Lane’s bed was now a full on crib. The two men managed to get Rod, still bawling his eyes out into it and raise the railing. “Garcia, get a bottle or something. See if we have a formula. Or a pacifier at least.” He sniffed. “Maybe a fresh diaper and wipes.” Unabashedly, a different kind of training kicked in and he unbuttoned Rod’s onesie and saw the wetness indicator. “Definitely a fresh diaper.”

Garcia was out of the room in an instant, grumbling. “Baby’s everywhere,” Nany heard him say. “Precinct’s become a goddamn daycare.”

“You see, Daddy?” Nancy said. “Do you see what I mean?”

Lt. Thompson nodded gravely. “Yeah, I see honey. I’m really sorry about that. Somebody should have come and checked this little guy. Taken him out of the bouncer so he could get some sleep.” Nancy almost swallowed her tongue. “We’re not trained for dealing with children.

We'll be getting him to a good foster home, first thing in the morning.”

Rod started to coo and babble in his crib.

Nancy almost fainted.

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Nancy sat on the stairs of the police station,, her eyes baggy and her body aching while Rod was being literally carried away. There was no comfort as the thirty something couple- Rod's new foster parents now that he was remembered as an abandoned infant-drove off with Rod strapped into a car seat that only she seemed to realize was big enough to fit an adult. Rod cried and mewled and screamed; inconsolable. Inconsolable, that is, until the foster dad made a funny face and picked him up, patting his back. Then Rod's childlike giggles had been damn near musical. That's because Rod Lane, the real Rod Lane, wasn't in there anymore. Only Little Roddy remained.

Nancy had refused to sleep, refused to so much as leave the police office until she was certain of her peer's fate. Watching him get carted off gave her no comfort. No peace.

Tina and Rod: Two babies, now as far as everyone but Nancy and Glenn were concerned. Each with a set of asshole parents that were downright neglectful to their Little ones. They were better off with a fresh start, before they could remember who their so-called Mommies and Daddies were. No one else seemed to take issue with or so much as notice the two tots humongous size compared to their same aged peers. Come to think of it, everyone seemed to mumble and hem and haw when talks about their age were, then speak up again when they were “just babies”.

Maybe the two of them would meet up again, Nancy thought sadly. Maybe they'd be friends at a local daycare. Perhaps they'd even grow back into highschool sweethearts. Nancy didn't think so. Some dark part of her psyche whispered that Tina and Rod were never going to be out of diapers or daycare ever again...

With Tina in a cot and Rod in a car seat, her parents' attention were once again beginning to zero in on her.

“Time to go honey,” Mom said, walking back over to Nancy from the curb. Dad had of course given her a call after things had “settled down” with Rod in the police station. Nancy felt numb, her body shaking from exhaustion with every step. Still, she trudged on, walking beside her mother into the police station parking lot over to her mother's car. “Hop in.”

Her dad walked up while her mom opened the car door. “This isn't over,” she said.

“You think more people are going to be abandoning babies?”

Nancy had officially passed the point of not giving a fuck if people believed her. “They weren’t babies,” she told him. “Tina and Rod were my friends. We go to...went to highschool together. That’s why they were abandoned; they’re really old enough to be on their own.”

Dad didn’t seem to find it funny. Nor did he scoff. “You think there’s someone out there turning teenagers into babies?” He was in full Lt. Thompson mode, now. To him, Nancy might as well have been someone tripping balls. Even the delusional might have a grain of accuracy in their ramblings.

“They’re not really babies. They’re still the right age. Just nobody else can seem to tell the difference...” That sounded crazy. Nancy was literally too tired to care.

The police officer crossed his arms. “Why don’t they speak up?”

“They can’t...”

“So who’s doing this?” Daddy was stern, but humoring her.

“I don’t know who she is,” Nancy told him. “But she’s burned.” Nancy was so tired that her voice came out monotone; exhaustedly describing terrors that she dare not dream about. “And she wears a weird hat. And she carries around a red and green bag, really dirty.” So tired was she that she didn’t notice the concerned expressions on either of her parents’ faces. Nor did she notice the worried, knowing glances they were sending each other. “And she carried around this big heavy paddle. More like a club, actually...”

Her father nudged her into the passenger seat of Mom’s car. He closed the door on her, but the window was left rolled down. “You better keep her home for a few days,” he warned, “until she really gets over the shock of this.” Being only just barely an adult, Nancy couldn’t realistically claim that she knew enough of the way the world worked to understand everything her parents said to each other. But long ago, she’d learned to recognize when her parents were purposefully using coded language in front of her.

“I’ve got something better,” Mom said. “I’m going to get her some help.” That sounded coded, too. Like she was about to take Nancy to a looney bin or something. As Mom turned on the engine and drove away, it was at least slightly comforting to Nancy that she got to ride up front in the passenger seat instead of being strapped into a car seat.

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The sign on the front of the building read: “Katja Institute for the Study of Sleep Disorders”. Fancy name notwithstanding, all it really was a different kind of hospital; a different kind of nut house.

Nancy wasn’t put in a straight jacket or put into a bed, but she didn’t feel any more human. All sorts of patches and wires were being put onto her head and arms. She felt almost as if she were part machine.

“Just try to get comfortable,” a nurse advised.

Easier said than done. This wasn't her bed. This wasn't her room. This wasn't her underwear. Mom had brought along a pair of pajamas. She'd also brought along a Goodnite.

How Nancy could be expected to rest under such circumstances was beyond her. The wires and beeping devices were awful. What amounted to sized up Pull-Ups was just salt in the room. But just like every other authority figure in her life, Mom seemed to have no recollection or realization that her nighttime accidents were an amazingly new occurrence. “You always wear Goodnites. You don't want to wet the bed, do you?”

Too tired to fight. Too tired to complain. Too tired to whine. Just. Too. Tired. At least she was allowed to change and dress herself in private. Her friends should be so lucky. In a sad way she was thankful for that much, no matter how uncomfortable and bulky, and thick everything felt.

The young lady would sleep, though. All the wires and Goodnites in the world wouldn't keep her from passing out. Her body was nearly at a point where it was screaming for relief. It was her mind that was keeping her awake, her terrified mind that she knew very well she could lose as soon as she began snoring.

“I don't see why you can't just give me a pill to keep me from dreaming.”

The doctor (at least she thought it was a doctor; guy was wearing a lab coat) smiled condescendingly down at Nancy. “Everyone's got to dream, young lady. If you don't dream, you go...” He tapped his head for emphasis. That was exactly Nancy's fear. If she did dream, she'd go! All that would be left of her would be a babbling drooling Pampers Packer, and her Mom and Dad would be none the wiser. She'd just be bundled up and taken back to her new/old nursery and breastfed. “Okay,” the doctor said as the last wire was placed. “All set.”

Nancy turned her head and looked at her mother. “No...” she was begging; halfway to mewling. The next word out of her mouth could very well be her LAST word.

“Please, Nancy,” Mom sounded at the end of her patience. Exasperated. “Trust us.”

“It's not you I don't trust, it's just...” How could she say it any plainer than she already had? Mom started to pet her, run her hand through Nancy's hair. Long forgotten, comforting memories came flooding back; ones of her mother gently combing and untangling her hair; before Nancy had learned to do it herself. Mom really was trying to help the best way she knew how. And since Nancy couldn't think of any better ideas, she sighed and whispered, “Okay...”

A single, light kiss on the forehead from Mom, and Nancy was left alone. Alone. To sleep; perchance to dream. And as the lights turned off and Nancy started to fade away, she sincerely

hoped that she would get to be alone in her own dreams.

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As her daughter laid peacefully in the safety of the sleep center's observation room, Marge looked on through the two way mirror. Her poor little girl; a woman actually. That was going to take some getting used to. They grow up so fast.

"How long has this been going on?" The doctor asked.

"Since those neglected children were found," Marge replied. Perhaps that's why Nancy had been acting so strangely: A young woman on the verge of independence, but still had that annoying little bed wetting problem. Finding those infants might have done more of a number on her than it would have others. Just the wrong mix of latent maternal instinct, embarrassed teen angst and a weird form of empathy shaking her little girl up. "She was fine before that."

"Besides the bedwetting?"

"Besides the bedwetting," Marge confirmed. "She's had that her whole life." Just saying it now, something felt off about it. Was she embarrassed for her daughter? In front of a doctor? Something about that wasn't right. "Now she thinks her dreams are real..."

Just the mention of those dreams were enough to make Marge think about squeezing into one of her daughter's nighttime pants.

"Well," the doctor said pointing to a screen, "there's no sign of pathology in her E.E.G. I'd guess that what we have here is just a normal girl who has been through two very rough days." Thank God he skipped to the second part so she didn't have to embarrass herself asking what the first part meant. Nancy's head shifted on the pillow; Marge wouldn't have noticed save for a bit of intuition and a lot of Mommy Muscle Memory. She waited for the doctor to confirm her suspicion. "And it looks like she's fallen asleep."

"Thank God." Marge let out a sigh. The computer screen in front of them started to send out a steady stream of pleasantly zig zagging lines; kind of like a lie detector test on T.V. "What the hell are dreams anyways."

The doctor chose right then to wax philosophical. "Mysteries. Body hocus pocus. Our brain trying to hit the replay and the reset button at the same time. No one quite knows for sure. We still don't know what they are, or where they come from."

That wasn't nearly as comforting as it was meant to sound, Marge Thought. Wasn't the point of science to understand Hocus Pocus. Wasn't the greatest fear the fear of the unknown? Marge stared through the glass at her daughter, lying there asleep like a newborn in her cot. Secretly, she hoped that her daughter wasn't finding anything unknown in the space between spaces.

A little over an hour later, the scene on the monitor started to change. "She's now entering a deep sleep," the doctor announced. He frowned a bit, looking at the readings. The lines on the monitor were starting to look a little more jagged. "Her heart rate is a little fast; probably just due to anxiety." Marge's own heart rate ticked up. "Otherwise, she's nicely relaxed. All signs are normal." Marge let out a breath. She'd picked a bad time to quit smoking. "She could dream any time now."

"Her beta waves are slowing..." The doctor sounded optimistic; pleased.

Marge looked at the screen. More intimate than even the two way mirror, a hidden camera had zoomed in on her daughter's face. Marge watched, smiling softly, as her daughter's eyes twitched behind her eyelids.

"She's into REMs now," the doctor intoned. REM's. Rapid Eye Movement. Good, Marge thought. Good. "She's definitely dreaming now," the man in the white coat said. "It's a good one, too," he added. He pointed to one of the read out. "Typical dream parameter. If it were a nightmare, it'd be plus or minus five or six. She's about three."

Marge felt herself relax. Good. Very good. That meant that all this crazy was in her and Donald's head as much as Nancy's. Like all things, this too would pass, and they could all happily forget.

The relief was not to last. Nancy started to gasp and mumble. Slight fidgets turned into jerks and kicks. It reminded Marge of a dog dreaming about chasing a rabbit; only Nancy was the rabbit. The machines seemed to agree, bleeping and blooping in alarming tones as the wave lines on the screen ticked faster and faster.

Marge did not dare take her eyes off her daughter. Even nestled in under the covers, Nancy looked like she was in the fight of her life. "Doctor, what's she doing now? Is she asleep or awake?"

The man in the white coat seemed to having a tiny seizure based on the movements of his head. "Something's wrong," he said, "it never gets this high." His voice was still calm, even if his hands were starting to blur tapping at the various diagnostic equipment.

Nancy let out a scream loud enough to hear through two way glass. Marge could just barely make out her hands reaching behind her in her sleep, as if she were scratching at her butt...or trying to block a spanking...?

In the observation room, the machines began to echo Nancy's dreamborn panic. "What's going on?" Marge asked.

"I-I don't know!"

“Is she dreaming?!” Panic had made itself a home in Marge’s head. Her daughter’s body lurched up with another shout. The girl appeared to be convulsing. Struggling. Fighting something. She screamed as her body was rocked up and down on the bed by a force only she could see and feel.

Leaping up from the computer the doctor ran into the observation room.

Nancy screamed “NOOOOOOOOO!” Her hand reached out and grasped for help that wasn’t there.

It wasn’t there...but it was coming. “Nancy!” Marge shouted over the screams and screeches of panic.. “Nancy! Nancy! Wake up! It’s Mom!” Two nearby nurses had to hold the girl’s feet so she didn’t accidentally knee Marge in the face. “NANCY!”

Nancy snapped awake, panting as if she’d been sprinting, her skin glistening. “It’s okay, baby,” Marge said. “It’s okay.” Again she started gently stroking Nancy’s hair, trying to bring her daughter comfort. Her fingers brushed against something foreign, something that didn’t belong and wasn’t.

“Nancy...” Marge said. Gently, she took the ribbon out of Nancy’s hair. “I thought I took all the ribbons out of your hair before bed.” That was wrong, though; Marge could taste it on her lips. She hadn’t put ribbons in Nancy’s hair in...in...how long *had* it been? Something in Marge was feeling...off...fuzzy...

The doctor came up with a syringe. “This will help you sleep.”

Nancy screeched as though the sedative were a lethal injection. She scrambled away, her back to the bed. For the first time, Marge got a look at her daughter’s arm. It was covered with gold star and smiley face stickers. Marge KNEW those hadn’t been on her arm a moment ago. Her knuckles hadn’t been bruised either; like they’d been rapped and slapped with a heavy ruler.

“What happened, Baby? What’s wrong? Tell Mommy what happened.” Comfortingly, motheringly, Marge placed a calming hand upon Nancy’s shoulder.

Through her hyperventilating and her panic, managed to utter out. “Don’t call me baby...” From beneath the hospital bedsheets, Nancy withdrew, of all things, a hat: brown and dingy and full of flowers. Marge swallowed. “Nancy? Where did you get that?”

“I pulled it off her head.” Nancy sounded like she didn’t even believe herself.

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The next morning was no better than the last. Hair frazzled and eyes heavy, Nancy’s body desperately wanted sleep, even as her mind railed against it. Had she been a more appropriate age for such terms, she might be best described as “fussy”.

Her hair lay in bits of tangled clumps. She hadn't combed it, despite her assurances to her mother that she would. Mom had offered to comb Nancy's hair after the young lady had needed help getting the ribbons out. She'd offered to bathe Nancy too, to help "just a little bit" with the stubborn stickers clinging to her forearm. Nancy had declined the bath and painfully peeled the stickers off one at a time. Even now, the sticky residue remained on her arm, forming little outlines of where the gold stars and yellow happy faces and tiny rainbows had been; a bizarre type of battle scar.

Speaking of battle scars, her knuckles were heavily and rightfully bandaged. They still throbbed as if they'd just been smacked. Nancy had been up all night icing her hand. The discomfort had been a sort of boon, tangled hair so it didn't feel right lying down, sticky sweaty skin and throbbing knuckles to make it so that whenever she closed her eyes her senses just honed in on the annoying sensations. If she'd had a mosquito bite just between her shoulder blades it would have been a darn near perfect recipe for insomnia.

Nancy came down the stairs holding the railing for support. Whether it was her exhaustion or the stuff in her dreams forcing its way more and more into reality was anyone's guess. Despite everything, she was fully dressed for the day, in jeans and a white sweater. In some ways it was a small miracle that she could still dress herself.

"She said she grabbed it off her head in her dream," Mom spoke into the kitchen phone. There was something about the way she'd said "her" in reference to the witch with the diaper bag and paddle. Having grown up on Harry Potter, Nancy noticed the tense way her mother spoke- the deliberate attempt to avoid speaking a name allowed. Very "you-know-who". "No, I'm not crazy!" Mom said. "I'm holding the damn thing here in my hand."

There was a slight slur in Mom's voice; nearly undetectable unless you'd grown-up hearing the crisp and proper way Marge Thompson tended to speak. The only time Mom's words started to jumble or slur even the slightest is when she'd had a few drinks or when she was arguing with Dad. Nancy placed good odds on it being a little bit of both this time.

"I don't know where she really found it," Mom's voice was terser, lower. She must have known Nancy was up and about. "I gotta go," Nancy heard just before the clicking of a landline on the receiver.

Even with vision blurred from lack of sleep, the highschool senior didn't miss her mother awkwardly stepping away from the phone and sliding a bottle of vodka behind her back. Nancy ignored it. She needed coffee. Now.

Wordlessly she went over to the pot and poured herself a mug, downing it as if it were the elixir of life. Those workplace sitcoms were more right than they knew; coffee really was a life saver.

"You didn't sleep at all last night, did you?" Mom asked. Nancy just kept downing the coffee.



Of course she hadn't gone to sleep. She couldn't go to sleep. Going to sleep meant risking another regression. Regression. That was the word for this. Everytime she dreamed, it seemed, a little less of her adulthood came back with her.

Her underwear drawer was half stacked with Goodnites, as if she was a bedwetter and had normalized it. She was a better wetter though...now anyways. Frequent breaks to the toilet had been another way she'd kept awake.

The other half wasn't any better. All of her underwear, her big girl underwear wasn't quite as big girl as she remembered. Women her age didn't normally wear Sophia The First panties. Even now. Even now, she was wearing my little pony on her hips. Around three A.M. last night, while trying to keep awake she'd even found a Pull-Up under her bed.

It was bigger than any Pull-Up should have been. It would have fit her perfectly; like the tapeless Frozen themed diaper with the fade when wet snowflake design was made for her. That had sent Nancy tearing through all of her drawers, examining every bit of clothing she'd owned.

The good news was that the Pull-Up was the only one she'd found. But one Pull-Up was too many. It was a leftover. Like she'd just graduated from out of them... Her jeans had an elastic waistband and snaps instead of proper buttons, but at least the snap was only at the waist.

The cancerous childhood had only spread so far, yet it spread a little more every time she closed her eyes. If she fell asleep again, she might wake up with an entire drawer of Pull-Ups; and that was if she was lucky. If she wasn't lucky, her dresser might be a changing table and there might be more snaps in her pants than just at the waist.

"You know, the pediatri-..." Mom stopped herself. "The doctor says you have to sleep or-"

"I'll go even crazier?" Nancy interrupted. Her back was turned. She was angry enough that she didn't want to look at her mother. If not for the coffee, Nancy might not even be here.

"I don't think you're crazy." Nancy could hear the lie in her mother's voice.

No, not a complete lie. "Crazy" just wasn't the word that Mommy...Mom would use. She'd have used "Silly" or "Cranky" or "Over-Imaginative", some other word to indicate her disbelief.

Mom reached around Nancy and snatched the mug away the moment she'd placed it on the counter. "And stop drinking that darn coffee. It'll stunt your growth."

"I'm already grown." Nancy pivoted around her mother and walked to the other end of the kitchen. Mommy didn't reply. "So, did you ask Daddy to have the hat examined?"

Mom closed the distance between them. "I threw that filthy thing away," she lied. Even if Nancy

hadn't heard the last bit of the phone call she would have known., Mom was an awful liar. She leaned up against a kitchen drawer closest to the refrigerator, and Nancy immediately knew where the ratty old flower hat was. "I don't know where you found it, or what you're trying to prove-"

"What I learned in the dream clinic," Nancy raised her voice. "That's what I'm trying to prove, *Mother!*" Mother might as well have been a curse word just then. "Tina wasn't a neglected baby. And Rod wasn't an abandoned orphan." She hated the way she was talking about her former classmates. It sounded as if they were dead. In a way, she supposed, they were.

She leaned in closer to her mother, hoping that the frightened sincerity in her eyes would pierce the woman's complete and utter disbelief. "It's this lady...this witch," Nancy whispered. "She's after us in our dreams." Her voice cracked a little; threatening tears.

Mom stepped away, breaking off eye contact, and turning away from her. "That's just not reality, baby."

With a swift tug, Nancy opened the offending drawer and ripped out the old flower hat in one fluid motion. "It's real, Mama." Nancy almost bit her tongue off trying to choke back the infantile nomenclature. She brushed the back of her mother's shoulders with the dreadful hat. "Feel it."

Even with her reflexes dulled by exhaustion, Nancy was able to snatch away the hat from Mom's reaching grasp. That's when Nancy knew her mother was drunk; perhaps much more so than she'd expected. "Give me that damn thing!"

"It even has her name written in it," Nancy pushed. "Nan Rueger, Mom. Nan Rueger!" She bent and warped the hat a bit just so her mother could get a good, irrefutable look for herself. "Do you know who that is, Mother?" Even drunk, the look of shock and shame on her mother's face was unmistakable. "Because if you do you better tell me because she's after me, now."

"Nancy, trust your mother for once, please." Mom seemed stone cold sober in that moment. The moment didn't last. "You'll feel better when you get some sleep." More than morning vodka was clouding her thoughts.

Nancy lifted up her sweater and showed her mother the easy button pants. "Feel better?!" She gave a quick flash of her purple pony panties. "You call this feeling better?!" She gestured to her arm, still spotted where the stickers were- at least Mom had been surprised by that. She pointed to her bruised knuckles. Mom stared on in silence. Why did adults...why did GROWN-UPS never believe what was right in front of their eyes? Why did there always have to be a rational fucking explanation for everything and why didn't the any of the rational ones ever make sense?

The throbbing in her hand caused Nancy's eyes to dart over her mother's shoulder, back to the counter. "Or maybe I should grab that ba-ba...that bottle, and veg out with you. Avoid everything

happening to me by just getting good and loaded.”

The fresh pain in Nancy’s ear was as sharp and burning as the old one in her knuckles.

WHAP!

Nancy let out a screech as Mommy swatted her on her bum, jumping in her tippy toes to somehow try and lessen the sting. No! Not like this! Not like this! Mommy let her ear go and Nancy skittered away towards the living room, clutching her backside with the same panicked fervor that a stabbing victim clutches their gash.

Mommy backed up to the sink, clearly shocked by what she’d just done to her daughter. A slap to the face would have been more preferable...more age appropriate...or at least less demeaning. On some level, Mom must’ve realized that. That’s what Nancy would have liked to think, anyways. “Nan Rueger can’t come after you, Nancy,” Mom finally said. “She’s dead. Believe me. I know.”

If that was supposed to reassure Nancy, it had the opposite effect. She felt her pulse quicken, with rage this time over fear. “You knew.” She approached her mother, flower hat in hand; damning evidence alongside her mother’s confession. “You knew about her this whole time.” Her voice was now deadly quiet. “And you’ve been acting like it was something I made up?”

“Nancy, you’re sick.” Her mother was just barely holding back sobs. “You’re imagining things. Playing pretend.” She reached for the bottle of vodka as if it were a teddy bear. “You’ll feel better after you have a nap. It’s as simple as that.”

Nancy yanked the bottle from her mother’s grasp. “I DON’T WANNA NAP!” With all her strength she tossed the bottle onto the kitchen floor. The sound of shattering glass was enough to make it so that neither woman felt tired- no matter how much alcohol or insomnia might urge them to close their eyes.

Nancy tossed the dirty hat at her mother. Mom didn’t even try to catch it, letting the wretched thing fall to the floor. That was fine by Nancy. Nancy turned and walked into the living room towards the front door. “Nancy!” Mom called after her. “It’s just a nightmare.”

Nancy grabbed a jacket and opened the door. “That’s enough.” She had no more time for her mother’s bullshit.

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The pond that afternoon was serene as the young couple walked over the bridge; stark contrast to what was going on in Nancy’s mind. Nancy had made a pit stop over to the local library and had messaged Glenn to meet her from there.

After the argument with her mother this morning, Nancy needed to be around someone who believed her. Even if he didn't, Glenn at least humored her; didn't look at her as if she were a crazy person or a child babbling about nightmares. Glenn was good like that. Just the two of them, alone and somehow secure there out in the open. It was the safest Nancy had felt all day.

Glenn had a bag of fast food in his hand. "When I get nervous, I eat," he confessed, popping a french fry into his mouth. He must have bought it just before they met up.

"And when you can't do that, you sleep." Nancy said.

"I used to," Glenn said. "Not anymore." While her boyfriend munched on greased potatoes, Nancy stole a glance at his pants. She didn't hear any crinkling over the quacking of the ducks or see any bulge of absorbent padding. But she was pretty sure his shoes had laces in them last time she saw him; no Velcro. She was positive they didn't light up when he stepped before, but decided not to mention it. "Have you ever heard of the Balinese way of dreaming?"

Nancy looked up from her book. "No..."

Glenn took a sip of cola, likely extra caffeinated. "They got this whole system they got called dream skills," he said. "So if you have a nightmare, for instance, like falling, right?"

"Right," she nodded.

Glenn reached in and took another fry. "Well, instead of screaming and getting all nuts," he told her, "You say, 'Okay I'm going to make up my mind that I fall into a magic world.'" He exhaled. "Make it something special like a poem, or a song." Leave it to Glenn to find something romantic or fanciful given their situation. "They get all their literature from art and dreams. Just wake up and write it down."

Nancy frowned slightly. A good philosophy as far as dreams went, she supposed, but it wasn't just dreams they were dealing with here. "But what about monsters or witches? Then what?"

Glenn pouted his lip out, but only for a second. "They turn their back on it. Take away its energy and it disappears." He opened the styrofoam container with his burger in it and took a bite out of it.

"But what happens if they don't do that?" A twinge of dread crept up the young woman's spine. Was she just trying to see all the angles, or had more than just her clothes changed? Little kids often asked such questions, too.

Glenn thought it over for a second as he sipped his soda. "Then I guess they don't ever wake up to tell what happens." Or in this case they end up gurgling and no one can understand them anyways.

Nancy smiled grimly. "Great."

Gently, her boyfriend took the book she'd checked out from the library. He was careful to stick his thumb in between the pages so she wouldn't lose her place, then turned it over and read the title on the cover. "The physics and engineering of Home Alone?" He read the title aloud with a question. "That movie with the kid and the dumb burglars where he turns his house into a death trap? What are you reading that for?"

Feeling too embarrassed to admit why, Nancy lied. "It's got some neat stuff in it. How dangerous the traps really would be in real life versus the movie. Thought it would be interesting to read." What she didn't tell her boyfriend was that she hadn't been allowed to check out Booby Traps & Improvised Anti-Personnel Devices. The librarian had thought her a little too young to check that one out without an adult's permission...

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The sun was setting when Nancy finally walked home. Her slow walk turned into a fast jog, verging on a sprint as her house came into view. A small part of her wondered if she'd somehow fallen asleep, if some ghost Nanny would jump out of the growing shadows and try and spank the adulthood right out of her.

"What the...?" the rest of that sentence hung in the air like "baby" Glenn in his jumper. In the time since she'd stormed out on her mother, the house had been altered; defiled even. Cold iron bars blocked every window, even the little peep hole in the front door. The rose trellis had been torn down to boot, its corpse still on the front lawn with little scarlet petals crushed underneath. Even the windows on the second story were barred.

No more late night visits from Glenn. No sneaking off in the middle of night, either. In a matter of ours, Nancy's home had become a prison. And though iron bars do not a prison make, Nancy feared they might do for a playpen.

"Oh, gross..." She walked inside and slammed the front door behind her. "Mother!" she called. Mother was the name of God in the hearts of children. To Nancy it was more of a swear word, a curse to spat at. Deep down, Nancy felt that if she called Marge "Mother" enough, maybe it'd sink in that she wasn't acting the part and might want to straighten up.

Mom walked in from the kitchen, already in her pajamas and robe, a cigarette in her hand. From the uneasy, not quite stumbling way she walked, Nancy guessed that there was more than one bottle of Vodka in the house. Mom said nothing. Just stared at Nancy as she lit her cigarette and inhaled.

"What's with the bars?"

Mom exhaled a puff of smoke, and said. "Security." Her voice was flat. Tired. Grim.

Pretty ironic considering that just this morning Mom had promised Nancy that she was in no danger and that she was sick and this entire thing was all in her head; a child's fantasy.

"Security?!" Nancy shouted. "Security from WHAT?!"

"Not from what, from whom." Mom's voice didn't raise a bit. It had been close to a week Nancy had last dreamt; actually slept. There, in the darkening house, not a single light on save the flame from her cigarette and the setting sun, Mom looked like she hadn't slept in longer. She opened the cellar door and flicked on a light, her face illuminated by a ghastly glow but her voice still just above a stage whisper. "Come down to the cellar with me, and I'll tell you."

Without speaking, daughter followed mother down the stairs and into the cellar, the silence starting to weigh on Nancy's mind almost as much as the denials and patronizing reassurance had done in the days that preceded. In this moment, her mother was becoming less and less Mom, and more and more Marge.

Words like "It'll be okay, honey," or "You're just imagining things" were little lies that parents told children to keep the bogeymen at bay; ignore the danger until it passed on its own; keep calm and carry on. Somehow, she didn't know why, but Nancy knew that she was going to be talking to her mother as something resembling an equal. Adult to adult. Time for the truth.

Marge took a seat by the old furnace and opened it, the screech.

"You want to know who Nan Rueger was?"

Nancy nodded.

"For a while before and just after you were born, Nan Rueger was a babysitter," Marge explained. "She converted an old house into a daycare and watched children while their parents were away, all infants." Knowing there was more to the tale, Nancy stayed silent. Babysitters and Nannies didn't just haunt people's dreams for nothing.

"Too late we found out she was abusing them; punishing them for things they couldn't help. Babies were supposed to be innocent. But they couldn't stay that way if they grew up. So she tried to stop them. Put needles in their shoes so they'd crawl instead of walk. Rap their knuckles if they showed that they could write anything more than a scribble. Give them stickers and sweet treats if they played with baby toys. Diaper them even if they were potty trained, and spank them if they asked to use the toilet instead of their diapers."

"Lock them in cribs and baby swings so they had no choice..." Nancy guessed.

Marge shuddered, and nodded. "If someone hadn't slipped in a bug, who knows how long it would have gone on. There are twenty kids...adults now...still in therapy after what Nan Rueger did to them."

Nancy sat down on the floor across from her mother, her knees starting to tremble. “It drove us crazy when we found out. So many of us thought the kids had been telling silly stories, or that they didn’t want to grow up. We didn’t think someone was making them afraid, or forcing them to regress.” She exhaled. “We didn’t believe...” Marge reached into the unlit furnace and took out a bundle of something wrapped in burlap.

Nancy didn’t break eye contact. “Did they put her away?” she asked.

“The lawyers got fat and the judge got famous, but somebody forgot to sign the paperwork in the right place and Rueger was free. Just like that.” Marge didn’t so much as blink.

The next question out of Nancy’s mouth was no louder than a strangled croak. A whisper in the dark. She was hearing the confession of the damned. “What did you do, Mother?”

“A bunch of us tracked her down after they let her out. She huddled into that same daycare and wouldn’t come out.”

Nancy leaned forward. “Go on.” She needed to hear this. More than anything she needed to hear it.

“We took gasoline...” Marge paused. “And poured it all around the place. Made a trail of it out the door. Then lit the whole thing up and watched it burn.” She took another long drag off of her cigarette. The smoke came out in staggered little puffs along with her breath. “The firemen were too slow to respond...on purpose. Your father and his friends never investigated. Everyone knew...but didn’t talk about it. My maternity leave ended two weeks later.”

The maiden said nothing as the mother unfolded the burlap. The crone’s paddle, the one from Nancy’s dreams, lay in pieces in Marge’s lap. “Her burnt up body was found cradling this, protecting it from the fire.” The silence dragged on. “So you see, she can’t hurt you now, Nancy.” Her eyes became glassy as tears threatened. “She dead honey, because Mommy killed her.”

For an instant, Nancy just wanted to believe her mother; to be that little girl one more time and know that everything would be alright because Mommy had and would protect her. But then that little bit of insanity kept back into Mom’s tone. “You’re safe. You can sleep. You can go put your goodnites on and go right to sleep.”

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Glenn was listening to his air pods and watching Tik Tok on his laptop. Mom hadn’t given him his cell back. The track ended at just the right time for him to hear the ringing of his bedroom phone. At least he’d been allowed to keep that. “Hello?” he asked.

“Hi.” It was Nancy.

“Oh. Hi.” The young man couldn’t help but smile. “How ya doing?” The sound of his girlfriend’s voice always had a way of raising his spirits (among other things).

“Fine,” she said. Dang she sounded tired. “Stand by your window so I can see you. You sound a million miles away.” Only Nancy’s voice was in that far off place. Still, he humored her, standing by his window so he’d be the first thing she saw when she peeled back her bedroom curtains. A modern day Romeo and Juliette situation if ever there was one. He felt that Mrs. Morgan would have been proud that he thought of the comparison.

“That’s much better,” Nancy said, looking at him from all the way across the street. Nancy needed her own laptop. Video chat would have been much more intimate.

Zoom would also have given him a view of his lady love without the iron bars. Mrs. Thompson must’ve figured out how they’d snuck out to the police station the other night. “I see your mom went ape at the security store today. You look like Rapnuzel in her tower or something.” Nancy didn’t say anything. From the distance they were at, Glenn couldn’t tell if her eyes were all the way open. “How long’s it been since you slept?”

“It’s coming up on the seventh day.” Nancy slumped against her window. “It’s okay. I googled it. World record is eleven.” That didn’t make Glenn feel any better. He was having trouble sleeping, too. But he wasn’t deliberately doing it to himself. “Listen Glenn,” Nancy broke in on his thoughts. “I know who she is.”

Glenn frowned. “Who?”

“The Witch...the one who turned Tina and Rod into big babies.”

No. Not again. Not those dreams again. Those were just nightmares. That’s all. Yeah, what happened to Rod and Tina was pretty fuckin’ weird, but none of the adults seemed worried besides getting them into good homes. Maybe this was just something that happened to people sometimes, and nobody ever told Glen. Yeah. And maybe the Earth was pear shaped. “You do?”

“Yes,” Nancy said, “And if she gets me, I’m pretty sure you’re next.”

A jolt. ““Me?!” Glenn pictured himself from one of his old baby pictures: Rolling around in a giant walker and drooling with nothing but a bib above the tray and a wet Huggies below. Only instead of himself circa age one, he pictured him in the here and now in such a compromising position. IT was not a pretty picture. “Why would anybody wanna turn me into a baby?”

“Don’t ask,” Nancy replied. “Just give some help nailing the bitch when I bring her out.”

“Bring her out of what?”



“My dream.”

“Heh.” In a weird way, Glenn felt better. Nancy was clearly delirious. “How do you plan to do that?”

Nancy’s response was way to ofast for Glenn’s liking. “Just like I did the hat. Have a hold of her when you wake me up.”

“Wait a minute.” Glenn interrupted. “You can’t bring somebody out of a dream.”

“If I can’t,” Nancy said. “then you can all relax because it’s just a case of me being nuts.” Poor thing. Her voice was so tired. It was amazing she was standing.

“Yeah well I can save you the trouble,” Glenn said gently. “You’re nutty as a fruitcake.” Then he added, “I love you anyway.”

He swore he saw Nancy’s smile all the way across the dark street. “Good. Then you won’t mind cold cocking this lady when I bring her out.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He had, in fact. He just didn’t want to believe her.

“I grab the lady in my dream,” Nancy told him, “you see me struggling, so you wake me up. We both come out, you whack the fucker and we got her!” It was the most awake, or at least the least weary Glenn had heard Nancy all week.

“Are you crazy? Hit her with what?”

“You’re the jock. You have a baseball bat or something.” Oh sure, Glenn thought. Grab one of his old little league sluggers, watch his girlfriend sleep, wait for her to drag a creepy ass Nanny out of her dreams and then club her over the back of her skull. Most obvious thing in the world, really. “Just meet me at my porch at midnight,” Nancy continued. “Oh, and meanwhile...”

“Meanwhile...?”

“Whatever you do,” Nancy said. “Don’t. Fall. Asleep.”

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“Midnight,” Nancy said, and then hung up the phone.

Glenn closed his curtain and then walked over to his bed. “Midnight,” he muttered. How was he

going to make it to Midnight? He was already dog tired. He wasn't doing a no-sleep marathon like his girlfriend, but he'd missed his fair share of forty winks, too. He sat down on it, his feet up but his back against the headboard. "Baseball bats and boogeymen....women? Boogeywomen?" He rattled his head to clear some of the cobwebs out. "Beautiful..."

He put his air pods in and started blasting music as loud as he could. He grabbed his laptop, hoping to find something to keep him awake.

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Nancy looked at a photo on her dream board; a relatively recent pic from this past summer. Nancy and Glenn. Tina and Rod. What had been four friends arm in arm and squeezed onto a park bench for a selfie had been altered...perverted.

Now, Tina, clad in a giant onesie, and Rod in nothing but a diaper sat on Nancy and Glenn's laps respectively. Tina grinned stupidly and Rod was sucking on a pacifier looking off to the side, like a bird had caught the not-so-little tyke's attention.

What would happen to these pictures if Nancy was next? Would Rod be remembered as babysitting them that day? Would Nancy be jamming fingers into her mouth with a dress that did nothing to hide her giant Pampers?

Nancy would have been horrified, mortified even, but she was just too damn tired. Tired. No. No sleep. Not yet. Not until she was ready. Barely thinking about it, she put another STA AWAKE pill in her mouth and swallowed it dry. She was popping them like Tic-Tacs, now. It was practically second nature by this point; almost reflexive.

Feel a yawn coming on? Pop a pill. Mind starting to drift? Pop a pill. Blink last longer than a second? Pop a pill. Pop-a-pill, pop-a-pill, pop-a-pill. Heh. Poppa Pill. That sounded funny, like some big Daddy who gave out medicine.

She pinched herself. No. Stop it. No giggling. No getting punchy. Just stay awake. Stay focused. Stay awake and focused or risk never growing up. She ran her hands through her hair and exhaled. What the pills didn't manage, the fear more than made up for.

She only hoped her boyfriend had the same resolve.

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Doris Lantz knocked on the door to her son's bedroom."Glenn? Honey?" She knocked again. No answer came out, but she could hear a sound through the bedroom door. (Sound was too nice of a word for it in her humble opinion. "Noise" was more like it. Then again, to be fair, her parents said the same thing about her music when she was his age.

Also much like her parents, Doris had just shown her respect for Glenn's privacy by knocking first, and then asserted her own authority by coming in anyway.

It was no wonder that Glenn hadn't answered. Those fancy headphones (or whatever they were called now) were plugged into his ear buds and were blasting "music" at a volume loud enough to where even she could hear. His laptop was playing something too.

But her Glenn was neither watching, nor listening. He lay passed out. Fast asleep. She remembered when she'd creep into his nursery and peek down on him in his crib, just in case the baby monitor wasn't giving her the entire picture. He'd grown so big, but in some ways he still looked like her little angel. All children were their parents' little babies, she supposed, no matter how big they got.. She almost hated to disturb him. Almost...

"Glenn." She tapped him on the shoulder. "Glenn."

The boy jumped awake, his jaw set like he was ready to swing and knock her block off. Doris leaned back, just as startled. She hadn't expected that kind of reaction. That must have been some dream he'd been having!

The panic lasted only a fraction of a moment, before Glenn regained his senses and joined his mother in the here and now. He took the tiny headphones, the air pods, out of his ears and looked up at her, seeming slightly embarrassed.

"How can you listen to the videos and hear your music at the same time?"

Glenn blinked. "Oh, I wasn't listening to the videos, Ma. Just watching. I'm watching a Scarlett Johansen Movie Marathon."

Doris pouted her lip out, and put her hand on her hips. "How can you hear what she's saying, then?"

Glenn smirked. "Who cares what she's saying?"

"Don't be such a smartass," she told him. Silently, she thought, at least she hadn't caught him looking at actual porn. "I want you to go to bed." He looked exhausted. The only reason she'd woken him is because he'd be infinitely more sore (and infinitely more cranky) if he spent the night as she'd just found him.

"It's almost midnight. A growing boy like you needs his rest."

"I will, Mom." Glenn promised. "You and Dad turning in?"

"Pretty soon," she assured her son. Such a good boy, even if he had so much more growing to do than he wanted to admit. That's why she was here, though; to take care of him until he did.

She waggled her finger, lightly at him. "Now get to bed." She stole a glance at his alarm clock just as she walked out. It read 11:42. Not quite fifteen minutes to midnight.

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11:43

"It's over, baby." Mom whispered gently to Nancy. "The nightmare's over."

Nancy didn't look at her mother. She just laid in bed, forcibly tucked in, wriggling uncomfortably in her Goodnite. (Seriously, how did little kids get to sleep in these things?) Mom stroked her hair soothingly with one hand. The rest of the bottle of anti-sleeping pills confiscated in her other. "Okay," Nancy mumbled and drifted off.

Gently she snoozed, dozing into a slumber....

At least until Mom collected the pills and coffee, turned out the lights, and left the room.

She was up and out of bed as soon as the door was closed, scrounging around for the extra pot of coffee she'd brewed and stashed under her bed. In a weird way, the bedwetting pants might come in handy. She wouldn't need to go to bathroom as often. Gulping down more of the caffeinated bean water, Nancy hoped that was her practicality thinking, and not a warped psyche on the verge of being magically infantilized.

After draining another two cups, the young woman went over to her closet and took off her nightie so she could slip into something a little less comfortable. A white button up blouse, and a pair of jeans would do. She buttoned up the front and went over to her window, gazing past the curtains and the iron bars over to Glenn's house.

Standing out on the front lawn was his father; practically playing security guard, drinking a beer and staring at his phone. He looked up, and though it was dark, Nancy could swear he was looking up at her window.

His mother came out and joined Glenn's Dad.

Damn.

They knew. Or at least suspected. With all the "babies" popping up, Glenn's folks probably assumed that he and Nancy were having sex and were doing all that they could to prevent becoming grandparents. Either that, or they too were in on the same conspiracy that Mom had told her about and were burying their children's safety in a wave of denial.

She closed the curtain.

Nancy stared at her bruised knuckles. The swelling had gone down but not much. She looked at her alarm clock. Shit. Where was Glenn?

Cautiously, she opened her bedroom door and peered out into the hallway. Mom was up. Up and drinking again; bottle of vodka in the towel closet. God, was Mom always this much of a drinker and Nancy just noticed?

Novices who were stress drinking didn't just have special hidey holes. That was Mom's problem, though, not Nancy's. Nancy only had the spoons for one life breaking problem at a time.

Shit. Where was Glenn? How was he supposed to get over to Nancy's if his dad was staking out the front door. How could Nancy get to him with Mom still in the hallway?

Desperate, she picked up her phone-a small kindness that her mother hadn't disconnected it-and called Glenn.

The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

"Come on, Glenn." Nancy said into the receiver. "Pick up." He'd better not be asleep, the bastard.

The phone stopped ringing. "Hello?"

Shit! Mom must have come back inside!

"Hello, Mrs. Lantz," Nancy said in her very best talking-to-parents voice. "Can I please speak to Glenn?"

"Hold on," she said. There was a pause. Nancy had the creeping feeling that the phone wasn't being handed over to her boyfriend. "What's this about, Nancy?" Her voice was more serious. Annoyed. On edge. Mrs. Lantz did not like Nancy in this moment, she could tell.

"It's private," Nancy said. "Very private, and very important." Shit! They probably thought she was pregnant now, or something! What choice did she have though? She was operating off the cuff and it's not like they would have believed the truth.

Another pause. This one longer.

The phone was passed, but not to Glenn. "Glenn's asleep you'll have to talk to him tomorrow."

Nancy had already been hung up on by the time it registered that she was hearing Mr. Lantz's hurried and annoyed voice.

With quiet breathing that was starting to pick up its pace into hyperventilating, Nancy called again. The Lantz's phone did not ring. It was busy. Maybe Glenn had picked up the phone and was trying to call her back?

She tried again.

Still busy.

And again.

Still busy.

And again.

Still busy.

She paused. If Glenn was calling her, she could wait and her phone would ring. If she was fast enough, she could pick it up before her Mom registered the sound. Nothing happened.

She dialed Glenn again.

Still Busy.

Nancy was on the verge of a panic attack. Either she and Glenn were so in sync that they kept calling each other at the exact same time or...

Or those mother fuckers had left their phone off the hook.

She hung up and went over to the window and stared across the street. The lights were still on in Glenn's room, but there was no other signs of life from the second story. "Glenn," she prayed. She couldn't yell, not without Mom hearing. "Don't. Fall. Asleep."

She went over to her bed and sat down, trying to keep calm. The best laid plans of mice and men.

BRIIIIIING!

Hope! Redemption! Glenn!

Nancy leapt up and snatched her phone off the receiver. "Glenn?" She whispered.

No voice came out the only end. Only the first tinkling notes of Brahms' Lullaby, like from a music box or a crib's mobile, came out.

Lullaby, and goodnight. Go to sleep little baby.

"NO!" she shrieked, and in her panic and adrenaline she ripped the phone out of the wall, only realizing what she'd done too late. "Brilliant," Nancy moaned. "Now what if Glenn tries to call?" The scream had created another complication.

Nancy went over to her bedroom door and looked out. No sign of her mother, anymore. Good. Really good. There still might be a chance.

BRIIIIIIING!

The young lady turned around, her blood curdling as she looked at her phone, still unplugged from the wall, ringing clear as a cloudless night.

BRIIIIIIING!

It lay there on her bed, ringing, beckoning her. Daring her to answer it. She walked towards it, slowly, like a poisonous snake.

BRIIIIIIING!

Nancy looked at the cable cord. Snapped in half. There's no way this could be ringing. No way.

BRIIIIIIING!

Unless.....

BRIIIIIIING!

She picked up the phone and placed it to her ear, and paused. "Hello...?" she whispered.

A raspy voice whispered back. "You're too little to be dating, Nancy. You're *both* too little. But you can have a kiss!"

Lips, actual lips, wrinkled and scarred by fire, shot out of the phone and kissed Nancy on the cheek. "MWAH MWAH MWAH!"

"AAAAAAAAAAH!" Nancy tossed the phone down and stomped it into pieces. And as the phone was broken into pieces, Nancy put others together. "Too little to be dating...both...my boyfriend...!"

Out the hallway. Down the stairs. To the front door. Nancy was a blur. An unstoppable force. That is, until she met the immovable object. The doorknob wouldn't turn. The door wouldn't budge.

Nancy pulled and pushed, and rammed her shoulder into it, but the door might as well have been a brick wall. "MOTHER!" This was no time for subtlety, no time for sneakiness. Glenn needed her. "MOTHER!"

"Locked," Mom slurred from the couch. "Locked, locked, locked." Nancy jumped. Marge had just been lying there in the dark; drunk and waiting for her. "I locked it all up. I had to. I did what I had to." She rambled, her eyes closed, even as Nancy approached. "Nancy, you are going to get some sleep tonight if it kills me."

Just barely holding back her anger, Nancy stuck out her hand. The next words that came out of her mouth were calm, quiet, and deadly serious. "Give me the key, Mother." Not Mom, not Mommy, not even Marge. She hadn't earned any of that. She was just Mother, now.

"I can't," Mother drunkenly giggled. She opened her pajamas and padded her pockets. "I don't even have it on me, see. Too drunk to remember where I put it, either."

If not for greater things on her mind, and the sudden shock of feeling a wet trickle into her Goodnites, Nancy might have committed murder right then. "DAMN IT!"

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The clock on Glenn's nightstand flashed midnight. On his laptop, Scarlet Johansen did backflips and dodged bullets in tight leather as the Black Widow, while his air pods blasted music just shy of deafening. Despite all of it, though, Glenn slept.

He slept as the movie on his laptop melted away and dissolved into Little Einsteins. Aiding in his sleep, even subconsciously, the music dimmed to the more pleasing and soothing tune of Brahms Lullaby.

Lullaby and good night, with pink roses bedight...

The posters on his wall, movies and bands that defined his adolescence; his manhood, evaporated from existence. Those that remained transmogrified into reminders about the alphabet, and cross stitches about how precious a little boy was.

Still, Glenn slept.

With lilies o'er spread, is my baby's sweet head...

The dresser drawers were gone in a puff, leaving only barren shelves. The topmost layer was



padded, like a massage table, with a little nook holding a box of baby wipes and a bottle of sweet smelling powder. The wicker laundry hamper nearby hardened into thick plastic, and the faint smell of stale urine and feces entered the air just beside; the distinct stench of used diapers never able to be fully covered up, no matter how much baking soda was put in the pail.

Still, Glenn slept.

Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed...

A guitar and amp that Glenn had always meant to learn to play folded themselves and combined into a toybox. The desk where he did his school work warped and added itself to the nearby seat until it was a rocking chair, perfect for breastfeeding, story time, or just a quiet cuddle with Mommy.

Still, Glenn slept.

Lay thee down now and rest, may thy slumber be blessed...

Up from the sides of his bed, wooden bars and a railing slid up on all sides. A simple boxspring and mattress slowly grew legs and boosted itself off the ground. And even though there was visibly nothing underneath the new crib, two hands reached up through the bottom of the mattress, carefully, lovingly wrapping themselves around Glenn's waist.

Too late, Glenn awoke.

Down, down into crib's mattress he was pulled, impossible though it may be. It was a solid whirlpool, a gravity well sucking him into an unseen abyss. "NO!" he shouted out. His bum was the first thing to be sucked in.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Not like this! Not like this!

"HELP! MOM!"

Down.

Down.

Down.

Quicksand! Glenn scrambled, clawed at the sheets, but they were being dragged down with him. He tried to kick, but everything beneath the mattress went numb, and the crib bars were just out of reach.

The last vestiges of his adulthood went under before him. His laptop. gone. His air pods flushed down the hole...the very last thing associated with him that would be flushed.

He called out for help, screamed as everything below his belly button went numb and dead. "MAAAAMAAAA!" A poor choice of final words. Had he had time, he might have thought of a better epitaph for his life up until now; preferably something that he'd be no longer able to say after this moment.

But that was just it. He didn't have time to think. It was too fast. "MAAAAAA-MAAAAA!" His head went under, then finally his hands.

Then.

Silence.

In his final moments of maturity, Glenn could have sworn he heard Nancy crying and calling out his name across the street.

WHAP!

A GEYSER! A yellow geyser erupted from the mattress. Gallons and gallons shot up to the ceiling, as if propelled by a firehose. Yellow rain splattered from the roof, dripping down onto the carpet below. The sound of it all, the splashing and crashing, the sheer enormity of the volume drowned out wailing cries of a mind snapping and a giant baby calling out in panic and confusion.

Impossible for there to be so much urine in a human body. Unlikely for that so much to be produced in just eighteen years.

But so much else was impossible and had already happened, so why not this?

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Hearing the noise, Doris burst into her son's room, and stopped dead. Watching the piss rain down from every corner of the ceiling, she opened her mouth to scream. As she inhaled, though, the smell of urine tinged with baby powder entered her nostrils and with it her eyes clouded over, becoming milky white for a second.

When they cleared, she blinked and saw her son laying in his crib bawling his eyes out and drippin, in his crib. He was naked, too. Somehow he'd managed to get his diaper off again, and the stream had gone just EVERYWHERE. That's what she got for getting the cheap-o store

brand.

“Fraaaaank!” She called. “Get up! Give me a hand!” Then she added, “Bring towels!”

Frank came trotting up, a bundle of white terrycloth in his hand. He glanced in the room. “Again?” he asked. He looked into the nursery. “At least it means he’s healthy. Remember when he was first born and he was in the incubator? He was so weak they just had to slide one under him and he’d dribble out.”

The two set to cleaning up their boy. “He’s so much better now.” Doris agreed. “But he’s still our little boy. I’m so glad they never grow up.”

“Me, too, hun. Me too.” Frank looked Glenn’s changing table. He instantly noticed the lack of diaper. “Oh criminy. Again?! How do we keep forgetting to stock up? You’d think we’d have the hang of this by now!”

“It’s your turn,” Doris said. “Walmart is open twenty-four seven.”

Frank looked to his wife. “What are you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna break out the old bassinet, and see if I can’t find some safety pins or something in the meantime,” she said. Glenn stopped crying long enough, to start pawing and Doris’s breasts. “Also feed him, I guess.”

\*\*\*\*\*

From out her window, Nancy watched as Mr. Lantz got in his car and drove off in the middle of the night. She didn’t need to guess why. She saw Glenn, a towel wrapped around his ass, and being held by his mother wave bye-bye. Diaper run.

The picture on her dresser confirmed it. Now she sat alone on the park bench, with three not-so-little tots smiling on the ground beneath her. Three down. Just her to go.

She picked up the phone in the kitchen, dialed the police station and asked immediately for her father.

“Nancy?”

“Hi, Daddy.” Her voice came out gargling and hoarse. “I know what happened now. I know who’s responsible for what’s been happening to all the...all the...the kids I’ve been babysitting.” Deep down, it hurt to refer to her friends like that. But it was the only way, she needed that tiny lie so that she could sell her truth.

“Yeah?” Her father seemed mildly curious.

“Listen Daddy,” Nancy went on. “I’ve got a proposition for you. Listen very carefully, please.” She was back on the verge of bawling. Bawling like a baby.

“Nancy...”

She barreled forward. “I’m going to go get the lady who did this. The kidnapping. The neglect. The...the...forced babying...” Hard swallow. “And I want you to be there to arrest her when I bring her out, okay?”

“Just tell me who did it and I’ll go get them, baby.” There was frustration and more than a little parental concern in the police lieutenant’s voice.

“Nan Rueger did it. And only I can get her. It’s my dreams she comes into. Just come here and break the door down in exactly twenty minutes. Can you do that?”

“Yeah. Sure.” He wasn’t buying it.

His daughter didn’t care. She closed her eyes and powered through. “That’ll be...exactly half past midnight. Time...” she stuttered. “Time enough for me to fall asleep and go find her. Just a little nap.”

Daddy was losing patience. “Honey...yes. Honey, go get yourself some sleep. That’s what I’ve been telling you all along.”

“But you’ll be here to catch her?” She could no longer hide her desperation; her fear.

“Yeah, yeah, sure I’ll be there, sweetheart.” Dad promised. “Now you just get yourself some rest, please. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

Nancy didn’t reply, just leaned her head against the wall until after he’d hung up on her.

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Drill a hole in a lightbulb with a thin screwdriver. Gunpowder from Daddy’s old shotgun shells. Combine and screw into a floor lamp.

Wooden clothespin as makeshift alligator clips.

A steel tripwire.

Screw in and install a bolt lock on her bedroom door. Croquet mallet above said door, rigged to

swing down whomever opened the door.

Kevin McCallister eat your fuckin' heart out.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I guess I should have told you about her earlier." Now Mom was in bed, tucked in, and Nancy was holding her hand. Time for goodbyes, just in case. This wouldn't be the last time they saw each other, but this could very well be the last time the two ever talked to each other instead of babble and coo.

Mom was a wreck. She hadn't been sleeping either and the booze and stress and guilt were taking their toll on her just as much as the supernatural on Nancy.

"I was just trying to protect you," her mother promised weakly. "I didn't see how much you needed to know." On some level, Mom must have realized how dire things were, too. You face things. That's your nature. That's your gift. But sometimes you have to turn away, too."

No. Not this time. Turning away meant a smacked ass and a forever padded bottom. "I love you," Nancy whispered.

Mom blinked. "I love you too, ba-..." she hesitated. "I love you too, young lady." That last bit meant more to Nancy than words could have expressed than just then. So she didn't even try.

With one last goodnight kiss, she turned the lights off in her mother's room and walked quietly into the darkness of her room. Here would be the final battle.

"Okay, Rueger," the grown-woman spoke aloud. "We play in your court." Her court, Nancy prayed...but by her rules.

She climbed into bed, pulled the comforter over her, and began to pray the most appropriate prayer she could imagine given the circumstances.

"Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
And if I cry before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my toys to break.

So none of the other kids can have them."

With Mom too drunk to keep it from her, Nancy grabbed her phone and set a timer. Ten minutes. Just enough time. One way or another.

As sleep started to take her, she thought of Glenn. About other things, too.

“But what about monsters or witches?” she’d asked back on the bridge. “Then what?”

Lightbulb.  
Door.  
Mallet Trap.

“They turn their back on it. Take away its energy and it disappears...”

Lightbulb.  
Door.  
Mallet Trap.

“But what happens if they don’t do that?”

Lightbulb.  
Door.  
Mallet Trap.

“Then I guess they don’t ever wake up to tell what happens.”

Lightbulb.  
Door.  
Ma-

\*\*\*\*\*

Nancy walked down the stairs of her house. Still clad in her jammies, and still (mostly) dry. Sleep hadn’t come for her. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

Sometimes things just worked that way...

Everything was just how she had left it. That’s how she knew she was awake. Her hand was still bandaged and throbbed with rapped knuckles. She still crinkled when she walked with the Goodnites making its presence known with every step.

The house was still deathly quiet. All of the lights were still out.

And just as it always had, the door across the hallway from the kitchen led down to the basement. Down past the old tricycle hanging on the wall, and the pink roller skate left at the bottom of the stairs.

She went to the furnace and opened it, taking the burlap sack out from its iron casket and flapping it open.

Empty.

No paddle. Gone.

The creaking of a door. Nancy looked and saw the door in the far corner. She didn't remember it being there, nor did she notice the Sesame Street banner hanging right behind the furnace.

She'd had no idea that behind the door were even more stairs, descending lower and lower. Only a baby gate was there to stop any hapless individual from falling down them.

Sometimes things just worked that way...

Stepping over the baby gate, Nancy descended the stairs, her hand gripping the railing as a low and quiet laughter echoed up to her from the darkness, and the nice familiar colors of her house were replaced with old and faded paint chipping off the walls. Paint that was once bright and sunny, but had long since faded and been chipped...or burned...away.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee!"

"You dreamed about the same freak I did," Tina's voice joined in, before turning into shrieking baby babble.

Nancy kept going down. It was the only way to go.

"Gonna get you...." The voice from the darkness taunted. "Nanny's gonna getcha...!"

Nancy knew where she was. She knew this was all a dream. It didn't make sitting on the corkscrewing spiral slide any easier. It didn't make her any less scared to hear a replay of Rod screaming as the last of his adulthood leaked out of him and into his diaper.

The grated, play place floor offered no comfort as Nancy stepped onto it. She tried to center herself and try to get a feel for the place, but over the railings were just more impossible tubes filled with the souls and sanity of children endlessly shuffling through them.

Endless crawling.

The echoing sounds of Tina softly crying out for her sent shivers down Nancy's spine and another dribble into her disposable panties.

She found a ladder and climbed down it; the fact that each rung was a different color of the rainbow did little to amuse her or lift her spirits.

"RUEGERRRRRR!" she called out. Only the echoes and the thump thump thumping from the inside of the crawl spaces answered her.

Rueger

Thunk-thunk

rueg-

thunk-thu-

“I’M HERE!”

I’m here

Thunk-thunk

I’m he-

thunk-thu-

No other choice. Further into the labyrinth she went. Smells joined the senses: Rash cream and baby powder. Stale Urine and the barely contained odor of dirty diapers.

A row of empty cribs, four of them; rickety, rotting decrepit things that no mother in their right mind would let their child sleep in took the place of the play equipment.

Each one with a different laying where the infant would sleep.

Trophies.

Tina’s old nightlight. She’d been the first. The easiest to regress.

Rod’s leather jacket, still reeking of Axe. It had been a security blanket in it’s own way.

She was being watched. Nancy could feel it, as if the eyes of a predator were watching her. Silent. Hungry. Waiting. Toying with her.

Nowhere was this more evident than the third rickety crib. Glenn’s laptop and air pods...boys and their toys. They were still wet and dripping with piss.

The fourth crib lay empty...for now. Yet Nancy could hear her own crying, her own infantile screaming off in the distance. A promise of things to come.

She dropped her boyfriend’s possession and snarled up to the eternal black sky of the nightmare nursery. “COME OUT AND SHOW YOURSELF YOU BITCH!”



The silence was the only reply she got. Digging into her pocket, she looked at her phone. Shit! Running out of time. What would she do if she couldn't find h-?

"NAUGHTY NAUGHTY!" The burned Nanny, sans her flower hat, was on Nancy in an instant, paddle in one hand a bar of soap in the other.

Nancy ran.

The old beldam chased her, cackling and cooing in her shadow.

The young woman scrambled over to another corkscrew slide, or the same corkscrew slide as before?

No. It didn't matter. Not here!

Home! She had to get home!

"COME ON, NANNY!" she taunted. "FOLLOW ME! YOU'RE IT!" Nancy slid down the slide just far enough to bypass the railing, and flung herself down into the blackness...

-...and crashed in her own front yard. The discarded rose trellis broke her fall from oblivion.

“DAMN IT!” She roared, picking herself up. She was in her yard, in her home...or a dream version of it anyways. No Rueger, though. No Nanny. “WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Her phone was beeping. A warning app she'd installed. Running out of time!

10...

9....

8...

7...

A grating, charred whisper from the trellis. "Nancy..." Nanny Rueger stood up from the rose bush. "Peek-a-b-!"

Nancy charged, right into Nanny's waiting arms. "I'VE GOT YOU NOW!"

The witch tittered, catching the charging woman and twirling her around onto the bed of roses. She was pinned, her arms held against her sides, as old lady kisses peppered her cheeks. "Give Nanny some sugar, baby!"

RRRRRRRRRIIIIIING!

The alarm clock buzzed Nancy awake, thrashing and screaming. "AAAAAH! AAAAAAH!" But as the lattice turned back into her comfy bed, the only thing she had in her grip was air.

Rattled and still exhausted, Nancy sat up from her toddler bed, the rustling of her nighttime diaper sounding like popcorn, even though it was soaked. It could hold a lot more. Up to twelve hours of protection.

On top of her lavender colored dresser was the changing mat she was just starting to transition out of needing; a stack of big girl Pull-Ups that she wore during the day beside it.

"That's it," Nancy whispered to herself. "I'm crazy."

The witch that popped up from the other side of her bed, seemed to disagree. "COME TO NANNY!"

Survival instinct kicked in over fear, allowing Nancy to side step her attacker, grab the empty coffee pot by her bed and smash it over Rueger's head. That bought her enough time to run to her room and lock it from the outside with the bolt she'd installed.

The monster-woman's taunts had devolved into angry roars as she clawed and pounded at the door. Heavy, thudding pounding, like a wooden club or a paddle breaking down the door.

Plan beat out fear, as Nancy used the precious seconds the dead bolt bought her, to arm the mallet trap she'd set up.

She opened a window and screamed out. "DADDY!" Where was he? WHERE WAS HE?! More pounding and thudding as she ran to the front door. Still locked. The girl grabbed an umbrella and shattered the the glass in the door. "DADDY!"

A thump and a groan let Nancy know that her mallet trap had sprung. Cold comfort. Grim satisfaction. But when real burglars were hit in the solar plexus and fell over the railing and tumbled down the stairs, they didn't get up nearly as quickly.

On her last legs, Nancy powered on. "COME ON NANNY!" She taunted. "CAN YOU CATCH ME?" She hopped over the living room couch and ducked.

The ghoul was fuming "You're not going to be able to sit down for a week..." she snarled.

A bright flash and a miniature explosion as the witch tripped the lamp trap. A little gunpowder went a long way. But would it be far enough?

More glass shattering. More screaming and praying that her father wasn't a complete asshole and was actually on his way home. "DADDY! HELP! HELP M PLEASE!"

The bars on her window had turned this place into a prison; an execution chamber. Rueger clambered over the couch. Unaffected by the explosion beyond momentary disorientation. She'd died once already. A little blowing up didn't bother her.

The only advantage that Nancy had was that outside of her dreams, Nanny was just as slow and lumbering as the rest of us. No more teleportation. No more popping out of literally nowhere. No more effortlessly wielding a paddle that was at least half her size. And if her panting was any indication, she was capable of being worn out, if not killed.

"I'm gonna give you SUCH a rash!" The woman bellowed as she chased Nancy down the stairs to her basement.

Time for a last ditch effort. Carefully waddling so as not to fall thanks to the thick padding between her legs, Nancy grabbed a jug; it was filled with a cocktail so strong even Mom couldn't drink it straight. The kind of moonshine that was used to burn warts off a mule.

Speaking of burns...

The shattered over the witch's head. The pack of matches did the rest.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

Nancy had heard of witches melting. She infinitely preferred witches burning. No joy came.

No time. Skin and clothes ablaze, Nanny Rueger chased a terrified eighteen year old up the stairs. She'd been burned to death once before and she'd gotten over it. What made Nancy think this time would be any different.

Stupid. Stupid girl!

Slamming the basement door closed, she felt the thud and heard the tumbling body back down the stairs. The problem with having a burning woman in her basement led to a burning house. All too quickly smoke rose into the air, threatening to choke.

“NANCY?!” A familiar voice. A good one. One belonging to a certain police lieutenant.

Nancy ran to the front door, just as her father busted it open, with one of his friends from work behind him. “DADDY?!”

“NANCY WHAT IS IT? WHAT’S GOING ON?”

“IT’S RUEGER!” Nancy cried. “I’VE GOT HER! I’VE GOT HER IN THE BASEMENT!”

She wasn’t in the basement, though. In the time it took Nancy to explain and lead her Daddy to the basement door, a trail of flaming footprints tromped up the stairs to the bedrooms.

It took her no time at all to know where she was going. “MOM!”

Mom was screaming when Daddy and Nancy ran in. Her legs kicked and her voice cawed nonsensically as she was pinned across the lap of a flaming woman and spanked bare handed. Mom! She was spanking Mom!

Dad tossed a blanket over them and tackled the two. “CAREFUL DADDY!” Nancy yelled. “SHE’S UNDER THERE! NANNY RUEGER IS UNDER THERE!”

Carefully, very carefully, Daddy took away the blanket. Still on the bed, wearing a yellow ducky onesie and a wet diaper that threatened to burst the snaps, Marge Thompson kicked feebly and cried around her thumb.

Daddy took a step back, flabbergasted, even as a box of Pampers manifested at the foot of the bed.

“Hey Lieutenant,” another police officer said from the hallway. “I was able to get the fire out.” He saw Mom crying on her bed. “Hey? Whose baby is that?”

Her Dad just closed the door and hugged his daughter. “Do you see, Daddy?” Nancy whimpered. “Do you believe me now?”

He didn’t say anything, but she knew he did. “I’m okay,” she said. “You go downstairs. I’m gonna change Mom and then we’ll join you.” Completely shell shocked, Daddy left.

“Lieutenant,” Nancy heard the other cop. “Everything okay? What’s with the baby. I thought you

had only one daughter..."

"I don't know," Daddy said. "I don't know."

Nancy just inched closer, looking down at her mother; her own incoming sobs threatening to match Marge's. Between the newest baby's sobs and Nancy's own, she almost didn't hear the bedroom door close on its own.

Almost. Teeth gritted, she grabbed a Pampers from the box and unsnapped Marge's onesie.

"I know you're there, Nanny," she said. She could hear the wood warping as the spectre crawled out of the shadows.

"You didn't think you were going to get away from me, did you?"

Nancy popped open a package of wipes, and undid the tapes of her mother's diaper. "I know you too well, Nanny."

"Now you're mine."

Don't turn around. Don't turn around. Don't turn around. Just keep changing the baby. Adults don't worry about spankings.

She balled up the used diaper and wipes and tossed it behind her. "It's too late, Rueger. I know the secret, now." She unfolded the fresh diaper. "This is just a dream. You're not alive." Unflinchingly, she tugged the new diaper up and taped it onto her babbling mother's hips. "This whole thing is just a dream." She kept her tone even and fearless, even though she wanted to scream.

Finally, she snapped up the onesie and turned to face her attacker; fearless. "I want my mother and my friends, again."

For the first time, the monster woman seemed taken aback. Confused. "You what?"

"I take back every bit of energy I gave you." The words were their own sort of spell. A curse. Binding. Ancient. Eldritch. Powerful. "You're nothing." She hissed.

With purpose, she turned around and picked Marge up. Surprisingly light. Neat. Nancy went and grabbed the doorknob. Didn't make sense to keep Daddy waiting.

"AAAAAAH!"

Nancy turned around just in time to see Nanny Rueger taking one last swing with her paddle before disintegrating into sparkling fairy dust. Baby Marge giggled and clapped.

No more power. Only a dream.

And so, it was with that, her power restored and her adulthood intact, that Nancy Thompson set her Baby Mommy down on the floor, opened the door, and walked back out into the waking world...

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Nancy blinked as she stepped into the sunlight. No crinkling accompanied her footsteps. She was wearing panties again. No baby clothes threatened to over take her.

Her skin was healthy, her hair done up and her eyes bright.

She was rested. The long nightmare had been nothing more than a fitful nap.

"The sun," she squinted. "It's so bright." After so much darkness it felt good.

Mom came out the front door behind Nancy. "It's going to burn off soon, or it wouldn't be so bright."

"Mom?" Nancy gasped. "How are you?"

Mom beamed there in her pure white dress. "Oh, I'm fine. They say you've bottomed out when you can't remember the night before." She gave her daughter a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for taking care of me. You're gonna make a great mother someday."

"Thanks," Nancy said, actually blushing.

Mom winked. "But hopefully not too soon."

The sound of an approaching car signaled the end of their conversation.

"Have a good day."

"Thanks, Mom. You too."

The car honked. Her ride was here. Glenn drove up in his hot red convertible. The top was down, and Tina and Rod were only inches away from each other's face in the back.

Nancy skipped down the driveway and hopped into the passenger seat, not even opening the door. She leaned over and gave Glenn his good morning kiss...

Just as a red and green top popped back over them. "What happened?" Nancy giggled.

“Yeah,” Rod asked. “What’s goin’ on?”

The doors locked. “Hey hey!” Glenn cried out. “I’m not doin’ this!” Harness belts leaped out from the seats and restrained the four teens.

Nancy felt her panties getting thicker while the harness snaked between her legs and snaps that weren’t there a moment ago unbuttoned themselves along the inseams of her pants, revealing the diaper underneath.

Tina screamed, and Rod yelped. Glenn just sucked his thumb. The house in the distance got lower, and the street got further away as the car’s chassis got farther and farther off the ground.

Her pants were gone now, replaced by a cute lolita dress. Glenn wore a dapper sailor suit. In the back, Rod and Tina wore complimentary onesies. All their screams were caught off by pacifiers leaping between their lips.

A stroller. They were in a giant stroller, built for four very big babies.

“Mmmmy!” Baby Nancy called out from behind her dummy. “Mmmmy!”

Mommy just smiled and waved as the stroller moseyed on down the street.

*Ten, nine, better watch your behind.  
Eight, seven, gonna learn your lesson.  
Six, five, never gonna thrive.  
Four, three, in your pants you pee.  
Two, one, Nanny says you’re done....*

*(The End)*