

BAIT

help me help me

A cry came from the well, faint and distant and afraid; hollow and inhuman as it clambered up the shaft.

“Hello?” He peered down, past scraggly roots, and at the murky bottom, could just make out a pale face. A girl.

help me help me

“Hey! Are you hurt? I can barely see you.” She looked sad and scared and small; just a child: her eyes wide and wet, brows peaked and pleading.

help me help me

“Don’t worry,” he assured, “I’ll get you out.”

He lifted his head, seeking aid or inspiration. Critters chirped and sang unseen but were no help. Night wind shushed the trees as it sashayed through their leaves and maverick droplets began thup-thupping the dust at his feet. Convening clouds above muttered the threat of outright downpour. She waited, eyeing him intently.

Over the well sagged a skeletal winch, gutted of cable and crank. Beyond that rotted the slat-ribbed carcass of a shack, windows unpaned, door unhinged and askew.

“Hang on. I’m just going to...” He turned from his wan charge, toward the rundown hut.

help me help me helpmehelpmehelpme

The night went silent as her plea increased insistence.

“Don’t worry. I’m still here.” He turned back, “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll help you.” Moonlight slid past his shoulder, down the walls of the well, trailing long shadows along the corrugated interior.

She bobbed below, watching with haggard eyes, sunk-cheeked and sallow face barely clearing dingy water, a dark, damp lock of hair lank on her forehead.

On tippy-toes he bent and stretched one hand down into the gloom. "Can you move your arms at all? I think I can reach you."

Slowly, five gangly fingers inched up the shaft, trailing spindly wrist, gaunt forearm and, eventually, one knobby elbow. As her hand drifted up, he leaned in, straining against his length. When he thought he could reach no further, he felt fingertips.

"That's it! Almost there!"

Their hands met, and clasped.

He exhaled, relieved, and a smile slid across the girl's face. Pallid lips parted, stretched and spread revealing the moonlit glint of teeth. He thought that perhaps there were too many teeth. Far too many teeth.

A trick of the troubled light, he was sure, and so: "Alright, hold on!"

She clutched at him desperately. Her hands leathery and cold, rough to the touch.

Body braced, he pulled and grunted. There was no give.

"I think you're stuck."

help me help me

"Hold tight. I'm going to try again."

He tugged again and again no give.

Her grasp held fast and then tightened. Wiry fingers closed on his with ravenous intensity, crushing his, grinding his and then pulling his, drawing him down. He scrabbled for purchase in the dirt and detritus around the well's mouth.

“Wait. Stop! You’re going to drag me...” He teetered and for one frigid instant, he thought ‘help me’, but had no time to cry out. It was too late. His balance was lost. He toppled and fell into the well, legs thrashing, mouth shrieking toward too many teeth.

His hollow screams were ground into gurgles and grunts and then those too dissolved as night cries returned timidly and drowned the echoes.

And there was another sound, soft at first:

help me help me