

## Frumious

*I wish to never wake up with nightmares anymore.*

Though Bobby hated nightmares, it was his mother who prompted him to make this birthday wish.

"You're a big boy now," she told him, mussing his hair.

*Yes. Yes, I am*, Bobby thought, contentedly clutching his brand-new, balloon giraffe.

"And you know what that means, don't you?"

*No*, he did not.

"It means no more nightmares. Big boys don't have nightmares."

Ever since his father had left, Bobby had dreamt that his mother would leave, too. He searched for her through unending hallways and windowless rooms and even in the alphabetized parking lot in which he had lost her last Christmas. The tall man had saved Bobby then. *A Salvation Armyman*, the boy remembered, with his bell and red pot. The Armyman had talked to Bobby and held him by the hand until the tears dried and his mother was found, shaken but relieved.

"Just dreams," his mother had sighed each night as she held him in her bed until he slept once more. "I'm right here." But now he couldn't wake in the middle of the night and run to her. Bobby was a big boy and big boys don't have nightmares. This worried him.

By the time the cake was paraded out to the sounds of an enthusiastic attempt at Happy-Birthday-to-Bobby, the boy had prepared a plan: he would simply wish the nightmares away. And this he did, smiling brightly at his mother as the five candles went out in wispy, whirly plumes of smoke.

Cake was consumed and in the flurry of presents that followed Bobby forgot all about the nightmares he would no longer be having. He was only slightly sad when no wrapped package contained the floppy-eared rabbit for which he had pleaded. This disappointment dissolved quickly in the laughing faces of a leering clown and a dozen gleeful guests. In fact, Bobby was quite content through the rest of his party and into the evening. By the time his mother came to put toys into closets and Bobby into bed, he was ready and yawning. "It's time," she said.

Bobby dutifully dressed himself for sleep and nestled under the covers, waiting patiently to be tucked in.

"You're such a big boy, now," his mother reminded him. She leaned in to kiss his forehead and said, as always: "Good night, my darling angel." As always, Bobby smiled and soon, Bobby slept.

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BOBBY. The boy stirred. BOBBY, WAKE UP. He opened his eyes slowly. Had someone called his name? BOBBY. Again: A raspy whisper that seemed to come from everywhere at once. Bobby sat up in his bed and looked the room over. Fresh presents littered the floor, casting dim silhouettes of super-powered action figures and Fisher-Price fire trucks against the wall in the orange incandescence of a

soothing night-light. Bobby's favorite overalls hung over the back of his brick-red desk chair. *'That stain will never come out,'* he remembered the words his mother had said when she saw the mud and grass frosting their front.

Everything was as it should be... except that the bedroom door was closed. Bobby never closed his door. Maybe his mother had closed it?

Standing, he went to the door. As he reached his hand to the knob — just to check if it's unlocked; not to open it like a little, scaredy-cat boy — he heard the voice again:

BEHIND YOU, BOBBY. The boy turned and his night-light winked out. The room was dark now; just a little moonlight through the window, but in the far corner Bobby noticed a shape: a darker shape. A crouching shape. Bobby backed into the door. Banged his head on the knob. Didn't care.

*Who're you?* The words wouldn't come out.

HELLO, BOBBY. Its eyes gleamed red as they took the boy in. And took him in they did. Bobby was frozen with fear. He'd never had this nightmare. I'VE COME FOR YOU. The shape rose and started toward the boy.

Bobby's fear melted away and was replaced by arid terror. He reached quickly for the doorknob behind his head, turned it and for a heartbeat feared it was locked. It wasn't; it opened. He ran through the door and pulled it closed with all his weight. After a moment, as he heard no signs of movement from inside his room, he opened his eyes — had he shut them? — and released the door.

Bobby looked around. *This isn't the hallway.* Well, it almost was. It was darker now. Darker and longer. *It must go a mile,* he thought. *A mile is a long way.* Avocado-green paint was bubbling and peeling from the grime-caked walls. Mildew crept oh-so-slowly across the ceiling. No more carpet, just rotting, stinking grasses under Bobby's socks. He could feel the wetness creeping through the once-clean, once-white cotton.

*'It's only a dream, my darling angel,'* his mother would say when he woke and all would be okay. But right now all was not okay. Despite his wish, Bobby was in another nightmare. To make it end he had to find his mother.

*But where is Mommy?* Bobby thought as he started slowly down the hall. He wasn't scared, he told himself; he was a big boy. A few steps and he found a light switch, flipped it on. An ooze-covered bulb in the ceiling flickered once feebly before flashing and shattering with an electric *Pop!*

Despite the dark, Bobby continued down the crooked hall, determined to find his mother, but watching the drifting shadows warily. No telling what might be in them.

At last Bobby came to the door to his mother's room. Long gouges scarred the wood. Three of them, side by side. They looked like claw marks. Bobby chewed his lip a moment before trying the knob. Locked. He yanked and pulled and tugged. The knob came off in his hand. Dropping it, Bobby pushed at the door. Nothing. He knocked. Again, nothing. He shouted for her: "Mommy?" Waited a moment, then

again: “Mommy!” He pounded the door with his fists, tears threatening to spill from his eyes. *She said she’d never leave.*

Sobbing now, Bobby sat down hard, back against the door. For a while he just sat, feeling the tears slip down his pudgy cheeks and drip onto his favorite pajamas. The Superman ones, with the cape that his mother said he couldn’t wear to bed. She didn’t want him to suffocate — *‘that means choke,’* his mother had explained gravely.

Now, she was gone.

*No. I can find her.* Bobby stood. *I can be a big boy for Mommy.* Wiping the tears with the sleeve of his pajamas, he looked around. It was dark. And dirty. He didn’t like this house. He didn’t like it at all.

Bobby was sitting in the middle of the hall. To his back, Mommy’s door. To the right, his bedroom and those burning eyes. To the left, the hall continued. *That must be the way.*

Sniffing slightly and still tasting salt on his lips, he stood. He started down the hall, away from his mother’s locked door and away from whatever lurked in his own room. On and on the hall went, monotony broken only by the bits of rubbish that littered the floor: rusted out lamps and pots; broken tables and bits of chairs; sticks and stones and a dead rat. Bobby stepped over the mess, inch by inch, until he heard faint laughter. He followed the sound down the hall to a doorway and the room beyond.

*This was the living room.* That festering lump of cushions and stuffing had probably been a couch once. The walls were gone though; there were only trees now. Sad trees with raggedly bent trunks and branches which droopily joined overhead to block out the sky. The grasses here gave way to muddy pools of fetid water and swarms of glowing fireflies.

There, in the middle of it all stood a clown. He wore a filthy, three-piece suit that may once have been checked in red and white and yellow. His face was smeared with as much soot and dirt as poorly applied grease paint. On his feet were enormous shoes, scuffed and torn in places. The clown pranced about the murky clearing, laughing happily as he caught glow bugs in gloved hands and squashed them between his fingers.

As Bobby entered the room, the clown stopped his prancing and stood silently a moment, staring the boy down. Then he sputtered and erupted into laughter once more.

Just as abruptly the clown ceased his merrymaking and tipped his hat. It was the kind of hat that magicians wear, but this one was ragged and worn. The band was in tatters and the brim was bent and torn. “Hello, my boy!” the clown pronounced around a smile, when Bobby said nothing he continued: “Don’t be scared, my boy. It’s just a dream.”

Bobby stood in the doorway, hands clasped behind his back, brows knit, chewing lip. He was not at all sure if his mother’s rule about not talking to strangers applied in dreams.

“I’m Oscar, my boy. Oscar the Clown.” With that, the clown curtsied low and smiled wide to reveal row upon row of rotted-out teeth and a bloated, black tongue. Bobby cringed, but tried to remember: *‘it’s just a dream.’*

“I’m B-Bobby,” he stammered, tentatively stretching out one hand in greeting. “Please to mee’ chu.” The clown giggled loudly. *Why is he laughing?* Bobby thought he had introduced himself the way his mother taught him. Perhaps he had done it wrong.

“I’m looking fer Mommy.” Oscar hooted harder; Bobby said it louder: with more insistence: “I need t’ find Mommy!”

“I don’t know Mommy,” Oscar chuckled, shrugging his shoulders and scratching under his hat. The clown wore a bald cap. Stringy, gray hair sprouted through in places where the rubber had ripped. “Is that her only name?”

Bobby thought hard. *Daddy said ‘Karen’ sometimes.* “I think’er other name is *Karen.*”

Oscar clutched at his sides and guffawed. ‘*Karen,*’ he mouthed, falling into the mud, writhing helplessly and splashing muck all over Bobby and his Superman pajamas. When the clown had calmed, he struggled to stand and brushed mud from his clothes before offering: “I don’t know any *Karenses*, my boy, but perhaps this will help?” Oscar pulled a black rubber balloon from his ear.

*Magic.* Bobby timidly took a step forward, keeping his hands behind his back. *‘It’s silly to be scared of dreams,’* his mother always said. But he was anyway.

The clown blew raspberries into the balloon noisily. Tying off one end, he began to twist and turn the inflated rubber deftly. In a moment he was done; he winked at Bobby, holding out the shape. The balloon was now a kitten.

Smiling now and less scared, Bobby took the proffered balloon-kitty in one hand and petted it with the other. *‘Softly, Bobby, softly,’* his mother always reminded. The kitten moved, nuzzling its black rubber head against the boy’s hand. It purred, making a sound like two balloons rubbed together.

While Bobby admired his new pet, Oscar pulled a long, rusty needle from one drooping sleeve. Holding the sharp sliver of metal gingerly between two fingers and grinning slyly, Oscar stabbed at the kitten. The deflating balloon phttt’ed off.

“Now, isn’t that better?” Oscar teehee’ed as he tossed the needle away. “Best medicine, my boy. Laughter’ll cure just about anything. Bruised knees and rainy days and...”

“It doesn’ cure finding Mommy,” Bobby replied. *Or Daddy.*

“Oh.” Oscar almost looked disappointed for a moment, then he brightened: “Alright, how about this?” The clown beckoned to the boy with one gloved hand and removed the hat from atop his head with the other.

Kneeling, Oscar held out his hat. “Hold that for me, my boy. I’m gonna need both hands for this one.” The clown winked at Bobby, who regarded the dark interior of the upturned hat, curious. The clown stood and began carefully rolling up his filthy sleeves. “Now, watch closely, my boy,” Oscar reached one lanky arm into the hat. Wrist deep at first, feeling around. Hmm, nothing there. He reached further in, up to his scab-covered forearm. Still nothing. Oscar feigned a look of concern. Perhaps the magic was

failing. Shaking, the clown tried to suppress laughter with tightened lips, but it came out anyway in hisses and grunts.

Oscar dug deeper. He was into the hat to his shoulder now, rummaging about until: “Ah-ha! Here we go, my boy!” When the clown withdrew his hand Bobby saw that he was holding a rabbit.

The creature did not look well at all. Its fur had probably once been white, what remained was mangled and mottled brown and gray. There was blood smeared across its face and one ear was torn clean off.

Holding the hare high by the scruff of its neck, the mirthful clown laughed hysterically. He dropped the animal into the mud and it limped toward Bobby. Before it had gone far the clown lifted one oversized shoe and brought it down on the pitiful creature. Bobby heard a squeal that ended in a crunch. The clown tittered delightedly and Bobby recoiled in horror.

“Stop it!” he shouted at the clown, fists clenched at sides. Oscar looked at him seriously, or tried and failed. The straight face he made was quickly interrupted by a new bout of giggling. Bobby was on the verge of tears. They welled up wetly, blurring his lucid view of this dream.

“Don’t worry, my boy,” Oscar chuckled, lifting his foot to reveal only mud. “See?” The injured rabbit was gone. “No harm done; just magic.” The clown gave him a wide, rotten-toothed smile. Bobby calmed down, but he realized that although this clown looked like a grown up, he was no help at all.

Before he could think what to say next, the fireflies flickered and went out. Dark. Just as suddenly, the clown was silent. No more laughs. No more chuckles or titters or guffaws.

“Where’s the lights?” Bobby asked.

“It took them.”

“Who’s it?”

“Don’t just stand there, my boy.” No time to laugh. “Run!” Oscar took off awkwardly, loping through the marsh in his enormous shoes.

Bobby followed as best he could on his little legs. Then the voice: IT’S ME. DON’T RUN. Startled, Bobby stumbled and fell in the dark. Stubbing his toe, bruising his knee, losing his breath. He felt the dark coldly fingering at his back. There was something there, but he couldn’t look. He rose and ran faster, or tried, but tripped and rose again. On and on he went until he was covered in mud and scrapes and prickles. Bobby fell one last time, his feet caught in some unseen sinkhole. He lay, coughing out the fetid water that had found its way into his mouth, too tired, too sore to move. So he lay still, hoping it would pass. Hoping the dark would pass and the shape and those eyes.

And they did. Off in the dark Bobby heard Oscar laughing. Laughing in fear. ‘No,’ the clown laughed. ‘Please! Don’t!’ And then silence.

*‘It was just a dream,’* his mother would say. *‘Don’t be scared...’*

But Bobby was scared. He sobbed silently in the dark. He wanted to wake and run to his mother’s room and her comforting arms. But it didn’t end and he kept dreaming. This was worse than the first day of school when his mother had left him with no more than a hug and a *‘be good, my darling angel.’*

The fireflies slowly began to reappear: organic constellations swirling and swooping above the muck. With them came the sounds of the forest. Boughs creaked as trees sighed their relief: “*it’s safe...*” Chirping crickets passed the word along: “...*it’s gone.*” In the distance, the warbling wail of an answering bird: “*it’s over...*”

Bobby had fallen in the midst of a dense swamp. Crooked trees crowded around the boy, their bark painted with swatches of brown moss and green slime, their gnarled roots clutching at the muddy ground. From above, faint starlight filtered through rotted leaves and the tangled branches to which they clung.

As he searched his surroundings Bobby saw an orange light winking through the trees. On. Then off. Then on again: this time to stay.

Soaking wet and covered in mud, Bobby stood. He looked at his filthy hands, trying to brush the muck off onto his filthier pajamas. ‘*What a mess,*’ his mother would say, ‘*time to draw a bath,*’ but she never really drew anything.

The bath would have to wait. For now, Bobby started toward the light, winding his way through bent trees and around puddles of darkly still water. When he was almost there, when he could nearly see the source through the trees, the light went out. A second later, it was on again and Bobby stepped into another clearing. This one was made up of three greasy walls and a flaking linoleum floor all smeared with crusty, brown filth. He was in a kitchen, complete with range, dishwasher and tiled counters.

There, in the middle of it all stood a corpulent cook, bent over, investigating the contents of an open refrigerator. The fridge stood propped against the far wall amidst a pile of pots and pans, its orange glow soaking the tiled space.

As Bobby entered the kitchen, the cook smiled wide, scratching under her hairnet with one hand and ashing her cigar with the other. Sweat dripped from her face, shining in the light, and dampened her clothing. When she stood, the cook was as tall as the fridge and a bit wider.

“Hey, kid.” The voice was a gruff man’s voice, and it took Bobby a moment to realize it had come from the cook. “Wha’chu need, kid?” She puffed at a cigar and wiped her hands on her apron, adding another set of prints to the already greasy cloth. “You hungry?” The cook took a ragged teddy bear from the fridge by its single ear and turned from Bobby. She moved slowly, laboriously maneuvering her bulk across the kitchen floor to the counter where she tossed the bear.

Wiping dry tears from his face with the back of one hand, Bobby took a step into the kitchen. The boy was hungry but he didn’t think this kitchen made anything he would like. One look into the open fridge confirmed this assumption. Fuzzy, gray mold covered most everything. A number of flies picked at a bowl of fruit, once juicy and sweet, now blackly misshapen and festering. More bowls, filled with grubs and maggots of varying sizes. On the top shelf, the remains of a Raggedy Anne doll: no arms, dress torn, hair charred, one eye missing, the other lazy.

Despite his best efforts, Bobby felt the tears well up. He just wanted to find his mother. He tried his hardest to fight them down, but they must have shown because the cook asked:

“What’s eatin’ you, kid?” She reached down to tug at her sagging stockings. “You tell Cookie all about it.”

“I los’ Mommy,” Bobby explained tearfully.

“Sorry to hear that. You eat somethin’, you feel better,” The huge woman took a bloodied cleaver from its hook on the wall and raised it high. “Let Cookie fix you a snack.” At home his mother would make ants-onalog — but they weren’t ants, he knew; they were raisins and they taste better than ants.

Cookie worked from a different cookbook. She brought the knife down and the teddy’s head plopped to the floor. Bobby jumped. Another chop and a stubby tail joined the head. The cook lifted the bear by its hind legs and sliced it longways. The matted stuffing burst from sliced seams onto the counter. Flies buzzed. Bobby wrinkled his nose and closed his eyes trying desperately to remember that it was all just a dream. *Wake up*, he told himself, but nothing happened.

“I need t’ find Mommy,” he insisted, eyes still shut. New tears leaked from his eyelids. His lower lip crept out, quivering threateningly. ‘*Big boys don’t cry*,’ his mother always said, but Bobby did.

“Don’t cry, kid.” Cookie opened the oven and tossed in the gutted bear in. The door clanged shut. One heavy step, two heavy steps and Cookie was before Bobby. She patted the boy’s head, adding droplets of sweat to the tears on his face. She smelt like Uncle Chuck. Like smoke and medicladed creams — ‘*for his joints*,’ his mother had explained, embarrassed but amused.

“Kid, I don’t know no Mommy’s. But…”

*But...*

Cookie smiled hopefully, leaking cigar smoke from nose and mouth: “But maybe *my* Auntie can help you find *your* Mommy?”

He looked up at the kind cook. *Maybe?* Cookie went on, “Auntie’s at the library,” she pointed over Bobby’s shoulder back into the wood and stood, returning to her culinary preparations. She snatched a bowl of writhing insects from the fridge. Tasting a few noisily, she dropped a handful onto a heated griddle. They sizzled. “You should find her. That’s the grown up thing to do.” Bobby turned, staring back into the swamp.

Smoke seeped from the oven but Bobby didn’t care. *Cookie’s Auntie. At the library.* Cookie’s Auntie was going to help him find his mother. The foul-smelling smoke stung his eyes. Made them cry more.

Cookie was at the fridge, rummaging about. Her muffled voice came from the chilly appliance, “sure you don’t wanna stay, kid?” Bobby glanced over his shoulder at the cook. She found what she needed and stood, one hand on the fridge’s door. “I’ll fix ya somethin’ nice.” Cookie smiled, swinging the fridge door shut. The light went out.

No more Cookie.

No more smoke.

Just an unlit kitchen. And then the voice: BOBBY...

Bobby, Bobby, Bobby. He hated the way his name sounded in that hissing voice. YES, BOBBY: STAY. From the trees the darkness spilled as the voice whispered inside his head. STAY. I'LL FIX YOU NICELY. There: the eyes. He remembered those gleaming eyes. They glowed, boring into the boy. Watching, waiting, whiling.

He ran to the fridge where last he saw the cook, reached the grimy, plastic door. Cookie was gone. Bobby turned. "Go'way," he shouted. Thinking frantically: "Wha'd'yu want?"

REMEMBER YOUR WISH? YOUR BIRTHDAY WISH?

*No more nightmares. Like a big boy.*

SILLY BOBBY. THAT'S NOT THE WISH. The dark wheezed a laugh. YOU WISHED TO NEVER WAKE.

"Lee'me alone!" He turned to the fridge, grasping its handle, and flung the door open. Orange light thawed the dark.

Bobby screamed. The darkness was gone and Cookie was back. But she wasn't moving, laying face up in a pool of lazily spreading blood. Bobby's legs collapsed and he sat down hard. The cook's thick throat had been ripped apart. A look of supreme horror was stamped upon her face: eyes wide, mouth wider. Bobby stared. Terrified. Too frightened even to cry. He just sat and held himself, shaking from head to toe, repeating in his head the soothing words of his mother: *'just a dream, my darling angel. Just a dream.'*

*But where is Mommy? Lost. Maybe lost forever.*

*No!* Bobby stood. He wouldn't lose her, not like he lost his father, and not here. He just had to be strong. That's what his mother had said in a half-remembered, white room where his father lay abed and tubed up tight. Bobby's father wasn't well then: pale and thin and smiling without teeth. *'Be strong,'* Bobby's mother had told him. *'Be a big boy for Daddy and dry those tears.'*

Bobby tried so hard to be strong, but the tears came and Daddy left anyway. Then the nights were darker and the days dimmer. His mother was dimmer, too. If only Bobby had been a big boy then... but he wasn't strong enough. He couldn't even open the strawberry jam until his mother loosened the lid.

Maybe he was stronger now.

*I'm a big boy,* Bobby told himself. *I'm not scared of nightmares.* But Bobby *was* scared, as he edged his way around the kitchen, back to the counter, as far from the corpulent corpse as possible. He couldn't tear his eyes from the gored body. One of Cookie's hands clutched at her wounds, trying to stem the flow of blood. No use. Beside her other hand, a fallen cigar was slowly burning a black hole through the linoleum flooring. Bobby closed his eyes tightly and hurriedly ran past the body, into the forest once more.

By the light of the fireflies, he picked his way carefully between bent trunks. Bark scratched, roots threatened to trip, mud sucked greedily at stockinged feet, and Bobby wandered. He would find the library. He would find his mother. On and on he went, hugging himself tightly against the cold and the damp. *This is forever,* thought Bobby. On and on. No library. No Mommy. Just the trees.

With each step, the threat of tears loomed larger and larger. With each step Bobby told himself, *big boys don't cry*. And with each step Bobby realized more fully that he wasn't a big boy. Not yet.

He sat down in the mud. Tears obscured his vision: he could not go on. All he could do was sob to himself. The tears came quickly now, clearing saline trails in the dirt and grime that covered his face; dripping torrentially into the swampy muck that was beginning to seep through Bobby's pajama bottoms. It was all too much. This was the worst birthday he had ever had.

At length, the tears ran dry. Bobby wiped his eyes, now puffy and red, with a muddied sleeve. Crying doesn't help. He had to think. Standing, he looked about: Trees. Trees. Trees in every direction.

Somewhere in all these trees was the library. Bobby had to find the library in order to find his moth...

"Who's there?" He stopped and started. Nothing, just breathing. Bobby's breathing. No: there it was again. He held his breath and listened, straining to capture every last sound: the trees creaking lazily, a small cloud of gnats buzzing insistently and... Yes, there it is: slow, ragged breaths.

ONLY ME, BOBBY. It's back, the whispering voice inside Bobby's head and all around it. WHERE'S MOMMY? The boy ran. He did not want to end up like the cook. Or the clown. NO, BOBBY, DON'T RUN. Outstretched branches tore at his pajamas and scratched the skin beneath. SUIT YOURSELF. RUN. Malicious mounds of roots snagged at his feet. RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN. YOU CAN'T ESCAPE.

*Can't find Mommy...*

Bobby saw a dark shape slinking through the trees directly ahead. Eyes wide, he turned the other way. I'M THERE, TOO, BOBBY. And it was, prowling in the darkness. He froze, looking frantically through the encircling wood.

The frightened boy could hear it rustling through the underbrush. Could see its movement from the corner of his eye, slowly circling, always just out of sight, but stalking closer.

DO YOU LIKE THIS DREAM, BOBBY? There: that darker shape.

"I jus' wanna wake up!" He shouted into the darkness, frustrated and furious, fists at soggy sides.

BUT YOU CAN'T WAKE UP, BOBBY. YOU MADE A WISH. Over there now: crimson eyes glaring from the mass of twisted trunks.

"I take it back." And once more, louder this time for good measure: "I take it back!"

YOU CAN'T, BOBBY. THAT'S WHY BIG BOYS NEVER WISH ON BIRTHDAY CAKES.

"I jus' wan'ed to be a good boy." *A big boy*. He tried to explain himself, turning to face the stalking creature but catching only glimpses. "For Mommy." And for Daddy.

The voice laughed. The boy cringed. Such a horrible sound. YOU WILL NEVER BE A BIG BOY, BOBBY.

*You're wrong*, Bobby thought defiantly, but by now, he had doubts. How could he be a big boy if he couldn't even find the library? If he wasn't even strong enough to find his mother? Lost his mother like he had lost his father. So careless.

A big boy would think of the grown up thing to do, but all Bobby could think to do was run. So, he ran. Away from the nightmare. Away from whatever followed.

YES, BOBBY, GO TO THE LIBRARY, the voice chased him. FIND MOMMY. AND WHEN YOU DO — slowly, the taunting words faded — I WILL BE THERE, TOO...

As the boy left that awful voice further and further behind the ever-present pools of murky water slowly receded and the ground dried out. The tangled roots that had caused Bobby to stumble so often sunk into the soil, in their place sprouted pitiful shrubs full of thorns. The branches overhead opened enough to let in a smattering of cold, blue moonlight.

The trees began to change as well. Their gnarled and crooked trunks straightened and grew taller. Looking up, Bobby traced the woody columns with his eyes until they swayingly tapered off into the darkness. He could hear wind whispering through the unseen boughs above. *Sounds like voices*, he thought.

“*What’s this?*” the breeze breathed slowly.

“*Just a boy. . .*” came the answer. The wind picked up as many murmuring voices considered.

“*A boy?*” they mused. “*He’s so small. Is he lost?*”

“Who’s there?” Bobby sought the source of the sounds. He saw only wispy runners of mist peeking from the darkness behind the trees, coiling and roiling restlessly.

The intoning trees continued their gossip, ignoring Bobby’s question. “*Why so scared?*”

“Yes,” the others wondered, “*why?*”

“*. . .only a dream. . .*”

“*. . .Lost his mother.*” There were many voices now. Bobby could understand only bits and pieces of their conversation through the jumble of whistling words.

“*Poor thing,*” the wind sympathized, “*. . .just terrible.*”

“Where *are* you?” Bobby cried out, desperate to be heard as the noise increased. Fingers of fog crawled slowly from between stoic trunks, clutching at the ground, carpeting it in fuzzy mist and closing in on the boy.

With the fog and rising wind came gnawing cold. Soaked and muddied, Bobby's Superman pajamas clung to his skin. He hugged his chest to stop his shoulders shivering and clenched his jaw to stop his teeth chattering.

“Kin you help me?” Bobby asked shakily, but the trees only whispered amongst themselves.

“Why won’ chu talk t’ me?” Wind coursed through the treetops as more voices joined the jabber:

“*Where’s his mother?*”

“*. . .doesn’t know. . .*”

“*. . .just dreadful. . .*”

“*. . .must be so scared. . .*”

“*. . .must be so lonely. . .*”

“...*should go to the library...*”

“*Yes, the library!*” A chorus of windy voices approved of this idea. “...*Grown up thing to do...*” There were so many now that Bobby couldn’t understand a single word.

“Shut up!” He shouted, but the sound only increased. The fog was thick now, he saw as he turned, trying to find someone, something, at which to direct his frustration. But there was no one. Nothing. Just a grove of silhouettes.

The trees said Bobby should find the library. Cookie said Bobby should find the library. Even the shape and those eyes said Bobby should find the library. But:

“I can’t fin’it,” he admitted to the trees, sobbing.

Suddenly, the whistling wind quieted.

“...*Doesn’t know where it is,*” a single moaning voice breathed.

“*Can’t find it?*” The wind rose to a roar as the trees hollowly howled their astonished surprise. Bobby saw the trunks swaying and heard their creaking through the thickening haze. Far above, unseen branches clattered against each other.

Bobby covered his ears but the din was only dampened. He shut his eyes and screamed. Still no use. For several minutes it sounded as though he stood in the midst of a terrible storm.

Slowly the winds moved on. The clacking sound of banging branches decreased. The trees stopped their swaying. Through his plugged ears Bobby heard a single arboreal voice:

“...*Right in front of his nose,*” and then nothing. No more wind. No more whispering trees.

Cautiously, carefully, Bobby removed the hands from his ears. It was absolutely silent. Just as carefully, he opened his eyes.

The trees were gone. Right in front of Bobby's nose loomed an enormous shape. The mist receded as he approached and the shape’s features faded into view.

There, in the middle of the fog, a concrete building was revealed, its face a row of featureless, stone columns bracketing twin wooden doors. A half dozen jagged and crumbling steps led up to those doors and above them, chiseled neatly into the concrete, were the letters Bobby knew meant ‘library’. Along the stairs and at the base of each column hundreds of books were stacked, rotting away, soaked with mildew, spines lolling like slobbery tongues.

*Almost there.* Tendrils of fog retreated as Bobby hurried excitedly up the stairs. He pushed; the doors swung wide. Light seeped cautiously through the open doorway revealing a mostly empty hall. Here a tattered and torn book, there a splintered reading desk. The broken-tile floor was haphazardly strewn with lonely pages torn from stories Bobby knew. There lay Clifford the Big Red Dog, alone without once-upon-a beginning or happily-ever ending. And over there, Curious George fluttered about on a breeze from the library’s open doors, the Man With the Yellow Hat nowhere to be seen.

“Hullo?” Bobby inquired of the dim hall. No answer, not even an echo. Only silence. He stepped into the library, peering through the darkness in search of Cookie’s Auntie — *she’ll help find Mommy*, he knew.

Bobby’s filthy socks no longer made the wet schloping sound to which he had become so accustomed. They were still wet and they still schloped, but they no longer made the sound in this silent hall. *So quiet*, he thought, hunched and cold, glancing about uneasily.

Slowly his eyes adjusted to the dim library. The hall was lined with columns like those outside. They towered upwards into the darkness to support a ceiling Bobby couldn’t see. Amongst the scattered pages on the floor were a number of books. Bobby recognized most of those he passed as he walked through the hall. There was the story of four-eyed Arthur and his pesky little sister, and over there a Very Hungry Caterpillar ate through the pages on which he was portrayed.

Ah! There was Bobby’s favorite. He knew it by heart but only his mother could tell it right. He bent to pick up the dog-eared book. *Where the Wild Things Are*, Bobby mouthed, tracing the title with one finger. He opened the book and flipped through its faded pages. In the dim light he could just barely make out the story. Max, sent to bed for naughtiness, escapes his room to find a changed world. There, the pajama’ed boy conquered the wild things and made them his subjects.

Bobby smiled, remembering the story the pictures told, but a movement on the page caught his eye. Beyond the dancing wild things, a wilder thing prowled the illustrated trees. A shadow, a dark shape, slinking from tree to tree. Closer and closer it came to the monsters dancing around their dreaming child-king until Bobby could make out those horrible, red eyes, as awful on the page as in the wood. Suddenly, it leapt from the trees at Max and his subjects...

Startled, Bobby tossed the book away. It scattered broken tiles and kicked up dust as it hit the floor, but made no sound. In fact, there was no sound at all. Not even the gasp that Bobby was sure he had uttered.

*Hullo?* Bobby asked the silent hall once more. Though his mouth and tongue moved, they made no sound. *Hey!* Bobby tried to shout. Not a whisper. Not a hum or a moan or a groan.

The silence made Bobby uncomfortable, but he still had a nightmare from which to wake. He looked into the gloomy corners of the hall to make sure that he hadn’t been followed from the book. The coast was clear but at the far end of the library he noticed light dimly emanating from beneath a small door. Bobby walked quickly to the door and knocked. It opened, swinging silently on nearly rusted-out hinges.

The room beyond was lined with bookcases, but no books. Instead, mushrooms and fungi grew in tiers up the shelves, accompanied by half-melted candles drip-dripping wet wax as their flames danced. An ancient rack sagged under the weight of a dozen ragged coats in one corner. There, in the middle of it all, sat a desk, old and scratched. Splotches of naked wood showed clearly through flaking enamel. Papers littered its top. One leg was missing; three threadbare books did the job instead. Behind the desk Cookie’s Auntie sat, wreathed in smoke, sucking thirstily at a spent cigarette.

Bobby stepped into the room and the door clanged shut loudly behind, the sudden sound startling like the book before.

“Hello, child.” Auntie flicked the butt away and adjusted her thick, horn-rimmed glasses: one lens broken, the other missing. Her graying hair was pulled back severely into a bun, stretching her pasty, liver-spotted face tautly cheerful. The high-collared dress she wore was navy blue with little, white dots.

“I’m Bobby. Kin’you help me?” Straight to business.

“Probably,” Auntie answered absently as she began searching for something. She opened the desk drawers one by one, digging through the papers and odds and ends that filled them. “You look shaken, child. What ever is the matter?”

“I los’ Mommy,” Bobby explained as she searched, “and’it’s chasing me.”

“What is, child?” She looked up, nearly concerned.

*The dark. And those eyes.*

“Oh, you should steer clear of that, child.” She dismissed his concern and returned to her search. “It will do you no good.”

“What’s ‘steerclear’?”

“Steer clear means, ‘stay away from’, child.” Auntie explained absently.

“But I can’t steer-clear.” Bobby liked using new words. “It wants t’git me. It said so.”

“Oh, that is dreadful.” Consumed by her search, she forgot to add the suitable amount of sympathy to her words. “You’ve lost your mother, have you, child?” she asked, still distracted. “What’s she look like then?”

He thought of his mother: *She smells like flowers. Purple flowers. She makes good cookies. Especially the chocolate chip kind. She does all the voices when she reads stories... And she said she’d never leave.*

When Auntie said no more, Bobby waited. Until: “Ah-ha!” she snapped the last desk drawer shut and held up a broken cigarette triumphantly. It was bent in two places and bits of cured tobacco stuck out where the paper was torn. The filter was burnt as though someone had attempted to light the wrong end. Nonetheless, she put it to her lips and lit it with a match from her pocket. She sucked in deeply and sighed, spewing smoke from mouth and nose. Bobby hated the smell. His mother said it causes emfazemia — *that’s why Daddy left.* Was Auntie going to leave, too?

“Now, child, what were you saying?” She took another puff.

“I los’ Mommy,” Bobby repeated.

“Lost.” Puff. “You have lost your *mother*. Now: you try.” Auntie absently ashed her cigarette with a flick of the thumb. The stress must have been too much for the tattered joint: torn paper split and ground tobacco escaped onto the desktop. It wasn’t until Auntie lifted the cigarette to her lips once more that she noticed it had fallen apart. She tossed it aside and resumed her search, growing more frantic by the moment.

“LosT,” Bobby practiced. “I losT Mommy.”

“Better,” Auntie encouraged distractedly, “try again.” She dug through the files and books and flotsam that littered her desktop. No luck. “Again, child. You must get this sort of thing right if you wish to wake properly.” Auntie turned to the desk chair, ripping through its ragged upholstery with a rusty letter opener she had discovered in a drawer. She tore out the chair’s stuffing with fervor. Bobby repeated as best he could while this strange, old lady moved on from the now-mangled chair to the pockets of the coats on the rack. Her eyes lit up as one expeditioning hand returned with a crumpled pack of smokes. Three left. Sitting heavily in the disemboweled remains of her chair, Auntie lifted a fresh cigarette from the pack to her lips, hands shaking in anticipation.

“The lady says you’kin help me.”

“The lady is it, child?” Auntie replied. “Well, first things first.” The librarian lit the cigarette with another match from her pocket. She inhaled deeply, medicating away her cares, and blew the smoke through her nostrils, thickening the haze that was beginning to fill the room. Bobby wrinkled his nose. Then he sneezed, adding dust to smoke.

“Do you have a cold?” Auntie asked with detached concern. As she spoke tentative tentacles of smoke snaked from her mouth and nose: “Figures with those clothes. You should have put on something more appropriate, child.”

“I din’t kno...”

“Nonsense, child.” Puff. Puff. “You should always be prepared.” Each word billowing on thick, gray smoke, rising in curling clouds, sliding along the ceiling and taking the room’s corners from focus.

The librarian sucked in the rest of her cigarette, savoring the last breath before exhaling slowly with closed eyes. “You should find your mother, child,” Auntie advised with eyes still shut. “That’s the grown up thing to do.” She spent a moment in silent reverie, a slight smile on her face. With a shudder, she flicked her spent butt away before drawing fresh from the pack. Bit it. Lit it.

“I’ dunno where she is.”

“Hmm...” The librarian sat and smoked while Bobby stood and watched. Watched and coughed. “Perhaps you shouldn’t have lost her then.” Auntie puff-puffed thoughtfully. “When did you notice that your mother was lost?”

“When I wokt’up.”

“Woke up?” Auntie raised an eyebrow; interested at last. “But, child, you aren’t awake now.”

“When I wok’up *here*,” Bobby elaborated.

Auntie relaxed, relieved. Another long drag, “Ahh, I see. And what happened when you woke up *here*?”

“No Mommy. I lookt fer her. She wasn’t here.”

“Not here, you say?” She sat a moment, considering the boy’s plight, cigarette drooling smoke from its pointer finger perch. At last she plugged the filter into puckered lips and inhaled. In a matter of seconds the cigarette had been turned to ash; its herb spent; its purpose fulfilled. Auntie tossed the butt

aside and brushed fallen remnants from her faded dress before reaching for another. She withdrew the last cigarette and looked at the package disappointedly. Empty. Auntie crumpled and tossed it aside.

“Well then, you should never have left your room,” she went on. “It was then that you lost your...” She patted down her pockets. No more matches. “Lost your...” she stumbled over the words. No, no matches on the desk, either. “Lost your...” She noticed the candles that illuminated the now hazy room, lit her cigarette and continued, “...What was I saying?”

*Mommy?*

“Ah, yes, you should not have lost your mother.”

“But I did!” Bobby insisted.

“Then, perhaps you shouldn’t have left your room,” Auntie smoked. Bobby coughed. “When you are lost, you should stay in one place, child. That’s the grown up thing to do.”

“But it’ll chase me.”

“If you wouldn’t run, it couldn’t chase you,” Auntie explained as though it were the simplest idea in the world.

“But it’d git me!” Ah, there’s the rub, Bobby.

Auntie began the search for her next cigarette, re-rummaging through each of the coats in turn and dropping them to the floor. When the rack was empty she turned to the bookcases. She brushed aside the colorful mushrooms that littered the shelves, searching for some misplaced butt.

“If you had just taken my advice in the first place, you would never have been in this mess, child.” As she spoke, her search took her further down the row of bookcases. It became increasingly difficult for Bobby to see her until she was no more than a dark smear in the ever-thickening smoke.

“You should probably find your mother, child.” Auntie’s voice came lazily through the haze. “It’s late.”

“How?”

“How what?”

“How t’ find Mommy!”

“Well, you shouldn’t have lost her in the first place.”

“I din’t!” Couldn’t’ve, shouldn’t’ve, wouldn’t’ve, but no help at all.

“Then how’d she become lost?” Auntie stepped through the smoke back into Bobby’s sight, an unlit cigarette dancing between her lips once more. “Mothers don’t just lose themselves.” She absently wiped bits of mutilated fungus from fingers to dress.

“My wish.”

“Wish, child? What wish?”

“My birfday wish,” Bobby explained: “No more nightmares.”

“Well, it’s simple then: you shouldn’t have made that wish. It was a foolish wish to begin. You should have wished for something useful...” Auntie drew on her cigarette, realized it was unlit and began again the survey of her pockets for a light: “...like a match, perhaps.”

“But Mommy said no more nightmares.” *‘Like a big boy,’* she had said, though, by now Bobby had all but given up on that. The nightmare was here to stay and he simply wanted to wake.

“And you should always listen to your mother.” She lit the cigarette on a nearby candle and sat down once more, sucking smoke greedily. “That’s sound advice.”

“But it’s a dream.”

“You should have just woken up then, child.” Puff. “You could have avoided all this mess.”

“I dunno how.”

Auntie sighed, tiring of childishness. “You should have thought of that before going to sleep, now, shouldn’t you?” Auntie stood and wandered into the haze. Slowly her features faded until she was a shadow seeking a fix. Then, that too melted away and there was just a voice: “But it’s no use crying over spilt milk.”

*Split milk?*

“You should have done what you did last time,” the words wafting back to Bobby, fainter now, further away.

*Last time?*

“Last time you were lost.” And further still.

*In the dark parking lot,* he remembered. *The Salvation Armyman.* With red hat on head and bell in hand and sad, smiling face. “I dunno where he is!”

“You’ll find him if you want.” Barely audible now. “Run along now. Go find your mother.”

YES, BOBBY. TAKE US TO MOMMY. Somewhere in this smoke, those eyes lurked. Bobby searched the swirling vapors frantically, but saw nothing. He turned but the door was gone. The room was gone. Just haze. Just smoke. Just empty.

Bobby ran anyway. He ran and ran until breath was scarce and he thought the voice was furthest away. Only then did he stopped and turn to see that he hadn’t been followed. He saw only fog — *like when you close your eyes, but gray instead.* He turned this way and that straining for some sign, some landmark, some something. But in every direction there was nothing. With all the turning, Bobby had forgotten which way was forward and which was back. If it weren’t for the soggy ground beneath his feet, he soon would have forgotten which way was up and which was down. It all seemed the same.

As Bobby absorbed his drab surroundings, he felt a tear slide down his cheek. He touched wetness and another tear hit his face. But it wasn’t Bobby crying this time. It was the rain. He looked up and saw more drops above. They fell harder and faster and grew larger and more numerous. Bobby hunched his shoulders against the wet, his eyes squinting for cover but finding none.

The rain came in sheets and blankets and bedspreads, washing muck from Bobby’s torn pajamas, soaking them through anew and setting off a fresh bout of shoulder-shivering and tooth-chattering. But it wasn’t all bad, oh, no. As rain fell, fog melted and the forest was revealed beneath the sloughing mist until Bobby could make out the faint shadow of trees all lined up at attention a short distance away. *The Armyman can’t be far.* Bobby could find him if only he wanted.

And he did want. Oh, so very much he wanted to end this nightmare. *But only Mommy makes my nightmares go away*, he knew. The Armyman had helped Bobby find his mother before. Perhaps he would do the same this time around.

The trees no longer whispered. They uttered not a peep and stood instead tall, silent, wet and watching the boy. Droplets filtered through leaves above, running down creased bark and pooling on the ground below. The fog retreated, slipping slowly behind the phalanx of trunks and out of sight.

In the middle of it all stood Bobby, listening to the rain drumming overhead, still sopping, hair and clothes plastered to skin, wringing his shirtfront between shaky hands. Once within the semi-shelter of the trees he relaxed a bit. It was dryer here and somehow he felt that he was closer to wherever he was going. Now he stood, attempting to shake the wetness from his clothes and doing his best to want to find the Armyman. *To want to find Mommy*. That's how you find something in a dream, he had been informed. Thought not a terribly difficult task for the boy, he wasn't sure exactly *how* he was to want in order to find. He had been wanting to find his mother all nightmare long but hadn't yet. Perhaps he was doing it wrong. Bobby concentrated, thinking of all the ways he wanted to find her. He wanted to find her smiling; find her laughing; find her warm arms and soft voice. He wanted to find her saying *'It's just a dream, my darling angel.'*

Perhaps that did it: behind the pounding rain, Bobby heard a faint sound. He tensed, listening as hard as he could. There it was again: a slow, steady clanging. A bell? It rang and he listened, seeking the source, picking his way through dripping foliage.

Bobby took one timid step in the direction from which he thought the sound came. And then another. With each step he was surer that this was the way he wanted.

The ground began to slope upwards. Ever-so-slightly at first and then steeper and steeper until he was on hands and knees, clawing at roots and rocks for purchase. Rain ran in rivulets through the mud, past Bobby, down the hill.

With each scrambling step the sound of the bell grew. Louder and closer until Bobby reached level ground again. He stood upright, filthy once more, and started through the trees, winding his way past soaked shrubs and skirting pooling puddles.

He could hear the bell clearly now and it clearly came from just ahead. Peering past one last trunk, Bobby saw clearing untouched by the swamp and falling sky. The ground ahead was high and dry; a smattering of wildflowers grew cautiously in dappled morning light filtering through parted branches far above. Sunlight. The first Bobby had seen since... since falling asleep. There, in the middle of it all stood a wrought iron tripod suspending a red, clay pot and there: the Armyman.

Bobby froze, taken aback by the sudden change in scenery. The Armyman stopped bell-ringing and doffed his visored cap in greeting. He was tall and thin as before and wore an undersized uniform that left pale forearms and lanky calves bare. Even stooping, his head brushed the branches overhead.

There was no face on that head. It was smooth and empty. Bobby felt that if this strange, slow-moving giant had had a face, that face would be a sad one. The small boy and the large man took each other in.

Bobby stepped from showering rain and into the shining sun. "I los' Mommy," he blurted. *The Armyman can help*. He knew this nightmare must nearly be over. Nearly ended. *Near Mommy*, he hoped.

The Armyman would have smiled kindly had he a face with which to smile. In one enormous step he was before the boy; patting Bobby gently on the head; taking him by the hand and leading him to the red pot.

Releasing Bobby's hand, the Armyman held up one spindly finger for patience and reached into the pot. A bit of rummaging and he gingerly withdrew a small door, no bigger than the palm of one charitable hand. *Mommy's door*. Bobby saw on it the scratches, the claw marks, miniaturized but just like before. He watched while the Armyman took the door to the far end of the clearing, bent at the waist and placed it firmly in the ground. The door stood upright, waiting.

The Armyman returned to Bobby's side, knelt and pointed to the door, smiling facelessly, eyes-that-aren't beaming encouragement.

Bobby hesitated. "But it's lockt," He protested.

The Armyman nodded, remembering. He reached into his waistcoat pocket and withdrew a strange key. A skelltin key — *that's what unlocks special doors*, Bobby's mother had confided in him. He took the proffered key and the Armyman gestured with both hands toward the tiny door set at the edge of the clearing.

It wasn't so much that the door was small but that it was far away. With each step it grew larger until, as Bobby stood before it, the door was Bobby-sized. Above, dark clouds gathered ominously, obscuring the sky once more, but Bobby barely noticed: almost home. *Almost to Mommy*.

It wasn't until he reached the door that Bobby realized the knob was missing still. He turned back to the Armyman...

LOST SOMETHING? There, behind the Armyman, in the rainy shadows behind the trees, darkness gathered. It seeped from the edges of the clearing, tentative at first, exploring the sunlight, caressing the flowers, then drowning them with shade and lapping at the high and dry.

The Armyman extended himself, standing tall and rustling the leaves above with his cap. Rage filled that faceless visage. He swatted at the reaching dark, swishing away the smoky runners. More followed, growing thicker, stronger, clutching at the Armyman's legs now, threatening to topple and tear him down.

Bobby cowered by the door, not knowing what to do, where to go. Frantically, he scoured his surroundings for a flash of burning eyes. There!

Darkness billowed now from between the trees, engulfing Armyman and clearing. Bobby ran toward the giant and faceless safety. Those eyes moved too, heading the same way, stopping the boy in his tracks, cutting him off.

Bobby turned, searching for somewhere to go, somewhere to hide, but saw only dark unfolding around him. No door. No clearing. Just two darker shapes approaching each other and circling. He saw, more than heard, their struggle. He heard breathing and growling and snarling. Thuds and bangs and groans. Sloppy, fleshy wet sounds as blood was drawn and spattered and spilled.

Bobby cowered and cringed, unable to make out the details. He squinted at the shapes contorting in conflict, not knowing for which to root. There: a glimpse of red eyes. There: the silhouette of a cap. Shapes struggled around the clearing, around Bobby, slowing as the two oneiric entities tired. The silence between blows increased until at last there was a pained, gurgling low and a thudding crash that Bobby felt in his knees.

He waited, clutching his key and shivering apprehensively. When no new sounds came, he started cautiously, inching his way through the cold, the dark and the quiet to where he last saw those darker shapes. The eyes were gone, but the Armyman lay motionless on the ground. He looked smaller now. Shriveled and haggard. Defeated.

NOW WHAT, BOBBY?

Clasping the key in one hand, Bobby cowered, sinking to the ground and hugging knees tightly to chest, eyes on the shrunken giant. *'It's just a dream, my darling angel.'* His mother's soothing words did little to calm the boy as those eyes approached. "Wake up," Bobby shrieked at himself, eyes shut desperately now. "Please. Please wake up!"

THAT'S RIGHT, BOBBY. COWER. QUIVER AND QUAKE BEFORE THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE. The darker shape loomed over Bobby — much larger now; much closer now — spilling fresh blood onto his soiled pajamas.

"Yer only a dream," Bobby sobbed meekly in protest. He could smell hot, stinking breath. Like cigar-scented Cookie, lying in a pool of her own blood, it reeked. And Oscar, laughingly pleading for mercy. And like Daddy, in a white bed beside the respirator — *that helps Daddy breathe*, his mother had explained.

"I don't believe in you!" Bobby looked straight into those eyes as he said this and for a moment, he nearly thought the words to be true. That moment was soon lost.

YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN ME? The voice chuckled. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BELIEVE IN ME, BOBBY. Those eyes blazed brightly and Bobby's shut tightly. He tried with all his might to not believe in this dream. Tried as hard as he could to wake. He felt it close; his hackles rose. The stench of rotten breath enveloped Bobby, swallowed him.

I'M STILL HERE.

And then nothing. Bobby opened his eyes. Just dark. He opened them wider to no avail. He could feel a smooth, hard surface beneath his filthy socks. He could hear the sounds of silence in the empty air: his dry, raspy breath, quickened by panic; his heartbeat, ceaselessly lub-dubbing warm blood and hot adrenaline through elastic arteries.

...STILL HERE, the voice repeated, echoing from everywhere at once. The words filled Bobby's head and drove out his thoughts.

"No!" The voice made no response. "Where're you?"

I'M STILL HERE, the voice laughed, dripping with malice. BUT YOU'LL NEVER FIND ME. Eyes wide, straining hungrily for some taste of light, Bobby started through the empty dark, trying as best he could to follow the sound. AND YOU'LL NEVER FIND MOMMY.

Bobby still held the key that the Armyman had given him. He felt its hard metal shape in his fist. It was warm. Opening his hand slightly, he saw that the key had begun to glow softly. Soon, his eyes had adjusted to the dim, new illumination and he could see, not that there was much to see. He saw the floor, sleek and black, but on every side darkness swallowed the light before it had gone far.

Using the key, Bobby walked slowly in the direction of the taunting voice: MOMMY IS GONE...

Clenched tiny fists at sides, Bobby was now more angry than afraid. "Shut up!" he shouted into the darkness, but the voice would not:

SHE'S GONE FOREVER. YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN NOW.

"Shutupshutupshutup," he ran after the voice, screaming at the top of his lungs, until he noticed a motionless mass at the edge of the dark. Approaching, he saw that it was Oscar. Or what was left of Oscar. The poor clown had been mauled savagely, his suit hanging in shreds from an emaciated body cut deeply with crisscrossing claw marks. In each eye was stuck a long, rusty needle, like the one the clown had used to pop Bobby's balloon kitten.

Silent now, eyes wide and terrified again, Bobby backed away from the morbid sight. Only a few steps and he stumbled over another soft shape. This one was Cookie, exactly as she had been in her kitchen. Horror still on her face, slowly-burning cigar nearly ashed out. Beside Cookie's corpse smoked a smoldering mass and at its center, Auntie's glasses, the frames melted out of shape, lenses singed.

Bobby pushed himself up and staggered away, unable to pry his thoughts from the bodies behind. *It's just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dr...*

SHE'S NEXT, BOBBY. The voice was much louder now.

*Mommy's next...*

Next like the clown and the cook and the librarian and the Armyman. *But why not Mommy?* Bobby thought. Perhaps those eyes didn't know where she was any more than he did.

*Maybe Mommy isn't here.*

"You don't even know where she is!" Bobby shouted into the dark. *Maybe Mommy isn't here!*

Y... YOU WILL NEVER BE A BIG BOY, B, BOBBY, the voice stammered, clearly shaken, conviction cut to the quick.

There: just ahead. Bobby saw a small shape moving through the dark. It pitter-pattered away, just beyond reach of the lit key. He followed the sound until his light fell upon a tiny creature.

It looked like a toad – all slimy greenish-brown skin and bulging eyes – though it walked upright. In one tiny hand it held a makeshift megaphone – a cardboard cone with apex cut out. The creature looked

agitated, glancing wide-eyed into the dark, mumbling nervously to itself. Seeing Bobby had caught up, the toad-thing hurriedly lifted the megaphone to its mouth and spoke: NEVER BE A, UH...NEVER FIND... was all it could think to say, faltering.

For a moment, Bobby stood, confused. That was the voice, a harsh whisper inside his head and all around him. He held the key high for a better look. Was this tiny thing his tormentor?

*Maybe mommy never left.* The realization took Bobby's fear. *Maybe I did.* He slapped the megaphone to the ground and crushed the cardboard underfoot.

Stripped of its bark, the creature cowered. "Stay away from me," it croaked meekly, lifting fragile arms to shield its bald pate. "Leave me be!" It turned and scampered out of the light, red eyes now less menacing, the dark now less threatening.

Bobby followed, chasing the faint creature until, at last, his key found a door standing alone in the dark.

*Mommy's door?* No, this door had no claw marks; its intact knob beckoned brightly. NO GIRLS ALLOWED BUT MOMMY warned the hand-crayoned sign taped across its face. He knew this door. It was his door. It led to his room and the shelter of his sheets. *Mommy's out there:* through the door, through waking lids and a sunny-morning hall. Through her bedroom door and under down-filled comforter. *She's out there.*

This was the door that Bobby wanted.

"Please..." The fleeing gremlin stood with its back to the door. Now it was Bobby's turn to loom, his turn to frighten and pursue. Bobby's eyes gleamed. The thing trembled, sweat squeezing through clammy scalp, gaze darting this way and that, seeking egress.

Bobby pushed it aside easily, flung it out of the light, took no notice of its pleas and pleases and instead inserted the Armyman's key into the door's knob. As he turned it, orange light began to shine invitingly in outline between door and jamb. Bobby stepped back as the tumblers worked their mechanical magic and the door swung open.

There was Bobby's room.

*"Bobby..."* He heard his mother's voice, faint and far off.

*I'm coming.* Bobby stepped through the door and opened his eyes.

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Awake.

No longer so soaked and filthy with muck. No longer so shivering and scared. No longer so lost.

Bobby wiped shards of sleep from long-shut lashes. He looked around his room, toys frozen in mock battle, overalls over chair.

It was late. Bobby knew this because Mickey's hands met on the face of the clock beside his bed. Mother usually came when he slept late, glowing into his room behind a shining smile, easing him awake with loving hands and soft voice.

He flung aside the covers and rolled out of bed, cold toes sliding into slippers, shambling across the carpet, through his bedroom door into the restored hallway. He followed it to his mother's unmarked door. Reached for the knob – a moment of apprehension: *still locked?* It twisted easily and the door opened on silent hinges.

This was his mother's room. Four-poster bed with ruffled duster; four drawer bureau with mirror atop; four corners filled with potted ficus. There, in the middle of it all, his mother slept restlessly, tossing in tangled sheets. She called his name again. "*Bobby...*"

*Mommy...*

Her eyes were closed. There was an odd look on her face. Bobby knew that look. She wore it when he had found her before, he in the hands of the Armyman, in the lamp-lit parking lot, in good shape despite the possibilities spawned by a mother's malicious imagination.

He approached, shook her shoulder. She opened her eyes. "Mommy."

"Bobby," she exhaled, as though she had held that word in for quite some time. "I had a bad dream," she breathed. "I thought I lost you. I was worried." But the worry melted and her eyes softened, her mouth loosened, her forehead smoothed. She hugged Bobby and he savored the contact for one long moment before remembering he was supposed to hug back.