

## Pioneertown

The park was more dirt than lawn, littered with cigarette butts, meat stick wrappers, and torn corners of chip bags. Old-growth oak trees lined the perimeter. I set foot outside our Honda Odyssey, and the oppressive heat caused my maternity jeans to stick to my thighs like shrink wrap around a delicate-skinned cucumber.

"You should have said no to this party." Jim seemed reluctant to exit the air-conditioning of the minivan.

"We'll leave right after cake." I unbuckled our daughter Eliza from her booster seat. She immediately started to bawl, her little body going board-straight in protest. Thin but surprisingly strong, she fought me like a wild cat. "Now let's go greet the birthday boy with a gift and a smile," I muttered.

"I don't know any of these people," Jim shoved a worn baseball cap over the freckled, pinky flesh that stretched across his scalp. With a well-developed nose and somewhat receding chin, it was easy to overlook my husband's handsomeness.

"Of course you do," I said. But to my surprise, he was right. I'd wondered if I'd even met the kid's mother in the pick-up chaos at the end of the school day. I suspected her name started with a "C," like Christine or Cathy. It was probably one of those families where everyone had the same initials, including the dog, and the parents struggle to call out the correct name.

"No one leaves their kindergartener at parties." Pushing aside Eliza's wispy blonde fringe, I streaked chalky sunscreen on her reddened cheeks like warpaint.

"Wait a minute." Jim looked around. His usual placid expression grew animated "I came here as a kid." He pointed to a small clearing. "A giant buffalo painted green used to roam the park. I think it was called something like the 'Kactus Kow'."

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At first, I was certain I misheard my husband. I was born in England, so we often have little moments of misunderstanding like this. As Eliza scrambled from the car, I plucked a baby wipe from the console to wipe the sunscreen from my fingers.

"Jim, you're referring to bison. No species of native buffalo survived the ice-age on this continent." At the mere mention of ice, the pressure on my bladder became painful, and a few misty droplets soiled my knickers. I surveyed the area. Not a bloody toilet in sight. How, on god's earth, these parents expected to care for twenty or more excitable kids with no clear pathway to a restroom was beyond me.

"Eliza, dolly, can you carry Caleb's lovely present?" She didn't hear me, as she was too busy fake crying, complete with hyperventilating.

"I hate it here," Eliza choked out, her bottom lip wobbling. "Nessa hates it too."

Nessa, Eliza's imaginary friend, suffered from many theatrical problems. I prayed for the day when Eliza let Nessa go, like a dummy spat onto hot asphalt.

"But Nessa loves cake, funny magic clowns, and cheap little toys." I raked back my daughter's sleep-damp strands as I glanced around. Where did Jim disappear to? My pelvic floor was screaming.

"Let's find the party." I grasped Eliza's delicate hand a little too firmly. "Mummy's about to gush her trousers."

Together we trooped across the spotty grass towards a lone helium balloon tethered to a picnic table. This wasn't the rambunctious, festive affair I'd been led to believe from the adorable hand-made invitation delivered to our mailbox. I placed our present, an unopened 1000-piece puzzle of a Dutch masterpiece from last Christmas, on the sorry pile stacked underneath an oak tree. Eliza left my side to join the other half-dozen children who bothered to show up.

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"Cathy?" I inquired, certain the dull-faced woman spooning out potato salad must be the parent in charge. "I'm Sally, Eliza's mother. Could you direct me to the toilet?"

"The name's Cassie." She wiped her hands on the calico skirt of what appeared to be a prairie dress, a square neckline with stiff lace around the edges. Her long brown hair was twisted up into a knot, so tight her cheekbones almost popped out from her skull. "The outhouse is around the corner."

"I didn't realize there was a costume requirement," I said, ferociously grinning. Cassie regarded me with light eyes, framed by weedy, pale lashes.

"You don't like my dress?"

"Oh, that's not what I meant at all." My cheeks burned, in a panic of how recover face. "Your outfit is remarkable." I blurted.

Edging away, I rushed towards the Porta-Potty. Once inside, the suffocating air and the swarming flies caused me to gag. I held my breath, then dragged down my jeans to squat, exhaling with sweet relief as I felt my bladder deflate from the size of an overripe grapefruit to that of a wrinkled pea.

Unwilling to further contaminate myself, I kicked the door wide open. As I turned around, I spied my husband speaking to a tall stranger dressed for a barn-dance. He sported a thick handlebar mustache and a creamy cowboy hat pushed to the back of his head. A shriveled feather of the strangest blue was tucked into his twisted leather hatband.

"Why hello," I said, still miffed that my feckless husband abandoned me in the parking lot.

"Sally, there you are," Jim said, nonplussed. "This is Carter."

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My lord. Another "C" name. I'd never keep them straight. I dutifully stuck out my unwashed hand. Carter answered with a sturdy clasp, squeezing hard, causing the fringe on his Western shirt to dance aggressively across his chest.

"That's a brave look," I said, shaking myself free. "Absolutely inspiring."

"Bless your heart." He looked at me with the same dead-from-the-neck-up expression as his wife's. "We're about to start story-time and the savages hunt."

A bubble of panic rose up my throat.

"I'm not sure if our daughter will like the sound of that last bit. Eliza doesn't perform well in party competitions."

Jim cocked his head. "I'm sorry, you said 'savages' hunt. You meant 'scavengers,' right?"

Carter tucked two fingers in his mouth, emitting an ear-piercing whistle.

"Cowpokes, now gather around," he yelled. In various states of smeary, painted faces, the children ran to the small clearing where we stood.

"I'm going to tell you an old Mexican tale about a woman who lived around here a long time ago." Carter widened his stance, holding up his arms, speaking in a booming baritone. "Carmilla was the wife of a mine owner. Her husband grew rich from cinnabar, or what you folks call mercury. They had a son, a damaged creature, never quite right in the head, born with two extra thumbs." The cowboy wriggled his hands for effect.

"Now, Carmilla's husband soon grew tired of his domestic situation and neglected his family something awful, preferring the company of painted ladies."

"Pardon," I interrupted. "But I believe this story contains a little too much color for small children."

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"What color what that be?" Carter asked, glaring at me. "You got something against Mexicans?"

"Of course not!" Mortified, I glanced around for backup, but everyone's eyes were transfixed on the cowboy.

"Let him finish," Eliza begged, her twiggy legs crossed over each other on the grass. The other children chimed in, some wearing entirely inappropriate construction-paper headdresses.

Carter continued. "So Carmilla became angry and resentful, and all the loving words dried up in her soul. Carrying her her son, she went down an old mine shaft that ran narrow and deep."

"Someone needs to make him shut up," I hissed to my husband, but he didn't hear me.

"Down at the very bottom of the mine, there was a spring-fed pool. Carmilla and her son waded into the icy water. Her husband took a while to notice his family was missing, and when he finally told his neighbors, a search started, but everyone gave up by the week's end. Months later, the mine flooded and a woman's body, almost life-like, floated to the surface. Folks recognized Carmilla, but they never found her little boy. Legend has it, you can sometimes hear the crying of a child, trapped deep in the earth forever."

Jim's eyes darted around the park. "I thought you said parents stuck around at these parties."

Carter clapped his meaty hands together. "Now it's time to play a game."

The children let off a cheer. My darling raised her hand.

"What's your name, honeybee?" he asked.

"Eliza. My special friend Nessa says she can hear that little boy. She says he's lonely."

"Does she now." The cowboy moved a teensy bit closer to her side. Something in me wanted to smash in his head with a tree branch.

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"Nessa says he wants everyone to know the whole world is afraid of people who are different."

This nauseating fiction coming from Eliza's mouth caused me to reach the conclusion that I wasn't prepared to stick around for the party favor bags.

"We are so sorry to say goodbye," I announced to no one in particular, leaning over my daughter's scrawny body, wedging my hands underneath her armpits. As I lifted her from the ground, a spasm shot down the small of my back. I involuntarily jerked upright as Eliza slipped from my fingers.

"Jim." I kneaded my fist against my lower spine. "Do something. She's going to get overwhelmed and emotional."

"Don't be so miserable all the time," he said. "She's fine."

The other children tugged at Eliza's skinny arms, chanting, "stay for cake. Stay for cake."

"Eliza, I'm warning you," I said. "You're going to have a meltdown. Mummy knows it."

Carter took off his hat, plucking at the leather band. He stared at my daughter with the kind of intensity usually reserved for heretics. Crouching close to my daughter, he held out the broken blue feather.

"You take this. Go find that little boy."

I lunged for my daughter but it was too late. She'd snatched the feather, shouting, "ready, set, pow!" Then she disappeared behind the trees.

Fuming, I turned to my husband. "Well, this is your fault." My backache grew worse. Jim opened his mouth, but before he could speak, I snapped, "go after her." As he marched off, I turned my fury onto Carter.

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“I hope you’re jolly proud of yourself. You’ve invited us to this godforsaken park, and when you ran out of ideas to keep the children entertained, you encouraged my child to get lost in the woods.”

The cowboy regarded me with a long look. His eyes were as black as coal, soulless. He spoke in a shudder-inducing drawl. “The way I see it, you’re nailing that kid to your fencepost with an iron spike.”

Shocked, I hard-walked away from him, ranting, “if any harm comes to her, I’ll string up your balls with barbed wire.”

As I headed straight for the line of oak trees, a horrible realization occurred to me. I wasn't sure if my daughter even knew my first name. I was always “mummy” to her, and in a panic, she would most certainly forget all the vital information I'd drilled into her for just this type of emergency.

Storming up a path choked with thick brush, I glanced at a posted display explaining that long ago, this end of the park was on the site of an old gold rush era mine that released thousands of tons of toxic waste into the local creeks and watershed. My throat grew scratchy. Dry, spindle-like branches clawed at my legs, and several times I had to reverse course on the trail to find another way forward.

Tears started to well up, blurring my vision. If anything awful befell my daughter, I'd be blamed. The shame always falls onto the mother. *This is what happens when you can't keep a close eye on your child.*

I must have walked half a mile before I came across the opening for a tunnel, labeled the "Blue Jay" mine. A small plaque stated that in its day, it had yielded the Americas' richest deposit

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of mercury. I felt the hair rise on the nape of my neck. Mercury was the god who guided souls to the underworld.

I tested the wall of the squared-off entrance. It was well-timbered, with trestle supports visible along the interior walls.

"Eliza?" I had to crouch down to step inside the shaft. The temperature became noticeably cooler. I walked between rusted metal tracks that once must have carried ore carts loaded with rocks. The still air grew dense and moist as I ventured further into the gloomy passage.

"Darling, you must come out." There was no answer. Using the flashlight on my cell phone, I continued to follow the railcar tracks, illuminating the rich, red walls.

"There is there is no boy lost in the mine," I shouted.

After about fifty paces, the dull pain below my waistline grew constant. I paused, leaning over in the cramped space to shift the discomfort in my hips. Then came another terrible thought.

*If you wanted to disappear forever, an abandoned mine would be just the ticket.*

Forcing myself to go on, I approached a metal gate sealing off the rest of the passage. Shining my light past the steel bars, I could see the railcar tracks dropping into an abyss as the tunnel beyond opened into a wide cavern below.

As I halted to listen, an eerie sound surrounded me, like a swarm of whispering voices. Then, it stopped. Maybe my breath had echoed off the walls. Or was it the wind? My legs began to tremble like a rabbit's, and I found myself unable to move. Then a gush of fluid washed down my jeans. It smelled fetid, like blood tinged with bleach.

*Oh god. It's too early.*

Feeling as if I was about to be sick from the pressure in my head, I knew I had to find help. As I stumbled forward, a shadowy form blocked the sunlight at the entrance of the mine.



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"Sally?" It was Jim. "What the hell are you doing in there?"

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After that, everything became a blur. I remember my husband holding my hand. He'd found Eliza unharmed, and they'd been searching for me all over the park. Someone must have dialed 911, because the paramedics arrived. As they wheeled me into the ambulance, I begged to Jim ride with me but he said something about staying with our daughter. By the time I arrived at the hospital, I was alone.

Without discussion, a doctor decided I needed an emergency C-section. I was rushed into the operating theater, and multiple needles were shoved into my arm. Then I blacked out.

When I woke up, I rang for a nurse.

"Where's my baby?" I had no memory of the birth. Simple movements, breathing, moving, coughing, it all hurt.

"He's doing well. I'll have the doctor speak to you," she said, as I drifted out consciousness.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw a trim, silver-haired man at the foot of my bed.

"Sally, I'm Dr. Volkner. How are you feeling?" His tanned, broad face shone above his white lab coat.

"Where's my baby?" I demanded, fighting hard to break through the fog clouding my mind.

"He's on an incubator," Jim answered. His face was ashen, and he looked as if he'd slept in his clothes.

Dr. Volkner spoke up. "Your son needs to cook a little longer. As I was just explaining to your husband, even though he's underweight, he's otherwise a healthy child."

"Except for the fingers," Jim said. His voice was rough. "Tell her about the fingers."

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“I don’t understand.” I tried to sit up, but couldn’t lift myself from the bed without feeling nauseous. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Polydactyly is the medical term,” Dr. Volkner said. “Your baby has a rudimentary thumb on each hand. It’s not an uncommon phenomena in newborns.”

“So he’s deformed?” I wanted to cry.

“It’s a simple outpatient procedure, like clamping an umbilical cord after birth. The tag simply dries up and falls off. Or, you can choose to leave them alone, but conformity is usually favored.” Dr. Volkner typed up a few notes on the computer before standing up. “Get some rest,” he said. Then, he left.

“Eliza’s in the waiting room,” Jim said.

A feeling of intense cold, like I’d wandered into a blizzard without a coat, caused my limbs to shake. I didn’t know if I had a fever, or if all the drugs injected into my body had turned my blood to ice.

“She’s worried you’re upset with her,” he insisted.

Closing my eyes, my head sank back onto the pillow, grieving for a reality that was vastly different than what I’d expected.

“Jim, I can’t manage her right now,” I chattered. All I wanted was warmth, a hot water bottle tucked by my toes. “The way she is, I might lose my mind.”

My husband opened his mouth to retort, but then he clamped it shut.

“Eliza made something for you.” He laid a folded piece of card stock on my nightstand. I caught a flicker of a grimace pass over my husband’s features. “We’re heading out to get a bite to eat.” He turned to leave, but then something seemed to change his mind.

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He leaned over the hospital bed before planting a kiss on my cheek. It was the first time he'd ever done that. It was type of goodbye you'd give your sister on your way out the door.

Alone, I picked up the homemade card. Eliza had drawn a tree outlined with sprinkled glitter. Taped to the top of one of the branches was Carter's broken blue feather. As I read her message, I knew I'd have to bury the ruthless "what if" questions streaming through my mind and throw away the shovel. Mums must keep their sons safe, no matter what.

Inside, Eliza had written in her wobbly five-year old scrawl, "Dont be mad at Nessa and me alwayz. PS. We saved the little boy."