

The Decider

It comes again tonight.

The last visit was exactly three weeks ago. The same day Cheryl was finally diagnosed.

Our trouble began when Cheryl fell asleep on the swing set. She was just sitting there, gently wobbling back and forth, then she was on the ground. I'll never forget what she said when I looked into her confused, dirt-smearred face.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm just so sleepy..."

It was nine-thirty in the morning. We got up at eight that day. She had donuts and milk for breakfast. I got them for her, special. Just because. Because it was our morning to let Melinda sleep in, so it was just Cheryl and her Daddy.

Melinda wasn't happy to see our daughter's dirty face or bruised leg, but when we called the pediatrician, he wasn't concerned. So we moved on from the ordeal. Looking back, I wish we hadn't let it go so easily.

We wasted valuable time, overlooking episodes of mysterious fatigue, bruises, and bad balance. Doctor Heckler never seemed to give a second thought to Cheryl's copious night sweats. There was no concern for the six-year old's headaches at school.

Three weeks ago, we finally saw a different pediatrician. It was for what we thought was strep throat. Doctor Heckler was on vacation and Cheryl needed to be seen right away. She did in fact have strep throat, but during the physical exam, Doctor Miller noted other oddities. A few hundred questions later, and the pediatrician referred us to the lab for tests. The lab sent us to radiology. Radiology sent us to oncology.

Later that night, I lay in bed, but Melinda lay in Cheryl's room. As I cursed God and willed the Doctor's visit to be a bad dream, a figure emerged from across the darkened room. I knew it was not Melinda. The thing appeared from in front of my

closet door, opposite the hall entryway. More assuredly, the shape of the creature was inhuman.

The head was like a giant football on its side, the body like a toothpick. The short arms and long legs moved like tentacles. I heard the swish of fabric, smelled the scent of citrus, and an uncomfortable warmth spread over my skin. It moved with a measured, graceful poise. It might have been a dancer in an odd costume. It paused beside the bed, and in the minimal light from my alarm clock, I finally saw the thing.

It wore a business suit with a black necktie, and the head was grotesque but strangely non-threatening. The enormous, lidless white eyes dominated the top half of the football shape. A crack of a mouth spanned the width of that head on the bottom half. It leaned down to me as I lay frozen under my covers.

"One may be saved, but the Credo demands balance," it whispered. The enormous mouth barely moved with the words.

I knew what it spoke of. Could there be any doubt? I clung to hope. "Take me, then. Let her stay. She's only six--"

"No," it replied. Its voice was sorrowful and gentle. It sounded like a gentle rain as if the sky wept for our troubles. "Only the one can be traded, out of her time."

"Who?" I whispered. I did not want to know the answer, because I knew the answer. Yet, I needed to hear the confirmation. "How can she be saved?"

"The years that have been or the years that could be, given to the other," it said. "Mother for the daughter or daughter for the mother."

Tears coursed down my cheeks as I shook my head. "I won't. You can't make me."

"Then the time comes for both."

"But Melinda isn't sick," I argued. "She's healthy and--"

"Many never know the method of their passing. Yet, still, they go," the creature replied. "Choose one, and the other will have life."

"How long?" I rasped. "A day? A week? You're a devil!"

"Until the end of their days," it replied. If it took insult at my angry tone, it never showed it.

A lump caught in my throat, and I struggled to speak. It was patient and stoic as if time had frozen and the creature with it. Finally, I managed, "Save both. Please, save both."

"The Credo must have balance," it repeated.

"Then take me," I said again.

"In three weeks, the time will come. You must answer then, or both will be lost to you." It straightened to full height and its head almost touched the ceiling. "You must decide, Gerald Oner. Three weeks."

It disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared moments before. The next morning I put no stock in the thing's visit.

\_It was a nightmare,\_ I thought. \_Nothing more.\_

As the days passed, a sense of impending doom fell over me. Moments seemed to hang by threads, dropping too quickly. Life became cheerless and distracted. I felt my thoughts wandering to distant memories. Our wedding, Cheryl's birth, the day Melinda and I met, Cheryl's first steps. The past dominated my mind, and I could focus on nothing.

Nothing, save the poisoned promises of a nightmare creature. "One may be saved, but the Credo demands balance."

Now the third Thursday is here and it is evening. Tomorrow is Cheryl's next appointment with Doctor Helman, and Melinda will take her without me. I watch them as they eat supper. They are holding hands. The woman I love and the only child the doctors said we would ever conceive. They are both equally my life. How can happiness ever remain when either is gone?

Yet, I must decide, or be twice damned.

How can I choose?

How could anyone decide?

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