

THE NANNY

John Boston

Melissa shouldn't have been nervous, this was not her first rodeo. She worked as a nanny for a very exclusive company in the city. Most of her clients were very wealthy, from the upper crust of society. Your ability to take care of the children was as important as your ability to keep a secret. She had seen things throughout her career that would shock most people. Some rich people are very nice and easy to work for. Most are not. You just never know what you're walking into. She had to sign a very lengthy non-disclosure agreement that said if she opens her mouth about anything she has seen or heard while working for the agency, she's in big trouble. They were not kidding around.

Last year she worked for a famous Hollywood director. He had a fabulous house in Beverly Hills. He was a nightmare to work for. When he was home, he was drunk, he put his hands all over her and she had even seen him hit his daughter. She was tempted to call CPS. She should have, like any decent human being would have done, but she chose to just walk away. It ate away at her. She had taken the easy way out and the easy way out was going to ruin this poor kid's life. The mother was an actress who was MIA most of the time. She had only met her once. That was more than enough.

It was shortly thereafter that she began to notice a change in her mood. She had just broken up with her boyfriend, and she wrote most of it off to that, but it had been over a year and she still felt sick, it wasn't getting better, it was getting worse. She had been pretty much completely closed off since the breakup. She had only gone out on one date. He never called her back.

She didn't have many friends, she had never been very social. She would rather have just one or two very close friends, instead of a dozen fake ones.

She was completely, totally alone, except for the occasional call or text from her mom. Melissa was leading a very lonely life. Maybe that's what was causing her sickness. Either way, it was getting so bad, that she had really considered getting professional help.

He was a surgeon, she was a surgeon's wife. They lived in an exclusive gated community on the edge of town. He drove a Lexus. Still, outward appearances meant nothing. Some of the nicest people she had met were wealthy. Some were monsters. You just never really know.....until you do.

He introduced himself as Mr. Sperling. No first name was given. His wife was Mrs. Sperling, no first name was given either. They made it clear they expected to be addressed as Mr. and Mrs. Ma'am or sir was also acceptable. They had printed out a list of her duties, which were pretty standard. Her main duty was seeing to the well-being of their daughter Josephine. She was six.

She attended one of the finest private schools in the city. Her studies were of the utmost importance. They also expected daily updates on their daughter's progress and well-being.

As obnoxious as they were, they offered her a salary that was simply too good to refuse. They also hinted that if she were to complete her duties sufficiently, there would be an *off-the-books bonus* for her at the end of her stay.

Mr. and Mrs. Sperling were going to Europe for the next ten days. Mr. Sperling was going to do an operation at a hospital in Austria and had been specifically requested by a very wealthy middle eastern patient. They made it clear they were not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency.

She was used to dealing with these types of people, but that didn't mean she enjoyed it. They were incredibly successful no doubt, but that success came at a very steep price.

There isn't one blade of grass out of place in this neighborhood. That attention to detail can't be cheap. she thought to herself.

The Sperlings were pretty much like every other she had worked for. No better or worse. She knew once Josephine chose her over her ice-cold mother, that would be the end of her. She had seen it one too many times. Different face, same ending.

Josephine came down the stairs and sat next to her parents. Seemed like a nice kid. Quiet, that was nice. Of course, the apple rarely falls far from the tree. If her parents were complete tools, *this poor kid didn't have a chance.*

"Jo, this is Melissa. She is going to be your new nanny.

"It's very nice to meet you. Do you want me to call you Jo, or Josephine?"

"Jo is fine. Nobody calls me Josephine except my parents."

"Okay, Jo it is."

"Melissa, I know this is very short notice, but my husband had to push up the date for his surgery. We are leaving tonight, is there any way you could start like now?" asked Mrs. Sperling.

Well shit.....that was quick. Skip the interview and just get right to it.

"Certainly, if that's what you would like."

"Great, I'd like to go over the house with you, it shouldn't take very long," said Mrs. Sperling.

The house was large, impressive, and immaculate. Mrs. Sperling had quite an art collection. Melissa didn't know the first thing about art. She couldn't tell the difference between a painting that cost half a million and one you'd find at a tag sale for ten dollars.

She got the security codes for the doors and garage. Got the trash pick-up schedule, the delivery schedule for groceries, and the landscaper's number. The homeowner's association provided a

free lawn service for its members. Mrs. Sperling made it known that Jo was having difficulty sleeping at night. She was not to nap during the day or she would never get to bed on time.

"My daughter is a very bright girl with a very active imagination which sometimes gets the better of her. She has a hard time telling the difference between fantasy and reality."

So do most adults, lady. Melissa thought to herself.

They went over Jo's lunches and meals. She was allergic to peanuts. She did okay with wheat and she wasn't allowed anywhere near soda.

She took Melissa out to her bungalow outback near the pool. It was simply the top floor of the pool house that had been renovated with its own bathroom.

"While we are away, I want you to sleep in one of the empty bedrooms. The laundry room is in the basement, it's pretty self-explanatory. I guess that's it, any questions?"

"Enjoy your trip. I look forward to getting to know Josephine."

"We're putting our complete trust in you. I hope we won't be disappointed," said Mrs. Sperling

Yeah, we wouldn't want you to be disappointed.....that would just about break my fucking heart.

Mr. Sperling was busy loading their bags into his Lexus. She didn't even see him after she was given the tour. His wife handed Melissa a clipboard with her very detailed instructions on it.

"Jo's grandparents live in the city. If you need anything, I have their phone number written on the clipboard. We expect daily updates, I don't care when you send them. Austria is about seven hours ahead of us. Well, good luck, I'm sure there won't be any problems." she said and shook her hand.

Ten minutes later the Sperlings were on their way to the airport. Melissa called her boss and told her what was going on. Her boss didn't care, her only function was to keep her clients as happy as possible. There was no shortage of help in this city, full of college grads with tons of student loan debt. Melissa knew she was just one screw-up away from being replaced. Her longest client had been for over a year and a half. She ended up sleeping with her husband. They both decided to just walk away rather than ruin his marriage. He was a good guy, who just made a bad decision, as did she. You never make good decisions after downing half a bottle of Merlot.

She hadn't been with anyone since.

She found Jo in the kitchen. She was reminded of why she took this job, it was to work with kids. Someday, she would have children of her own.....someday, she would have a husband and a family of her own. Someday, she would be Mrs. Sperling and some girl would be catering to her every need.

"Can we make popcorn?"

"Is it on your mom's list?"

"No," she said putting her head down.

"Is it going to make you sick?"

"No, popcorn doesn't make me sick."

"Okay, but you better not tell your mom. I don't want to get fired."

"I won't," she said and put a bag of popcorn in the microwave. She even knew what buttons to press.

Two minutes later they were both enjoying the bag of popcorn. Melissa hadn't had popcorn in ages. It was wonderful.

"Bedtime is 9 p.m., right?"

"I know. Isabelle..... was my last nanny, she would always read me a story before bed.

"Do you have a story for me?"

"Upstairs, come on," said Jo, taking the bag of popcorn with her.

Melissa began reading to Jo. She continued reading and reading for almost an hour until she saw that Jo was sound asleep. She turned off the light and pulled the covers over her.

Melissa hadn't even unpacked. She dragged her suitcase and bags upstairs to the guest room. She had to wonder why the last nanny got canned. Maybe it was just time for her to leave. These jobs definitely have a shelf life. Melissa poured herself a glass of wine. She played on her phone for a few minutes. It was after the second glass that she remembered she hadn't set the security alarm. She was happy to see that she didn't have to go downstairs, she could do it right from the second floor. She set the alarm and then got in bed. It was just after 9 PM and she was exhausted. It had been a very long day and she was in a new environment. The last thought she had before she passed out was: *If I get fired from this job, I literally have no place to go.*

The scream woke her up from a dead sleep. It took her a few seconds to regain consciousness. She sat up and heard a blood-curdling scream coming from Jo's room. She ran down the hallway and opened the door. Jo was sitting up in bed, trying to scream, but she had exhausted all of the air from her lungs.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she said and put her arms around her.

Jo said nothing for a few minutes. She was crying and shaking all at the same time.

"It's okay, it was just a bad dream, that's all," she said rubbing her head.

"*Spiders,*" she whispered.

"What?"

"Giant spiders in my room. It wasn't a dream, they were really here," she said sobbing.

"Honey, you just had a bad dream, there aren't any spiders in here."

"Well, they were here. I wasn't dreaming. I know the difference."

"Sometimes dreams can seem very real, but they aren't, they are just made up images in our heads. Come on, I'll stay with you until you fall back asleep."

Melissa crawled back into bed with her. It wasn't more than ten minutes later, Jo had fallen back to sleep with her arms around Melissa.

Yeah, I ain't going nowhere. I'm going to milk this job for all it's worth. Rich people can be great, you just have to convince them they can't do it without you.

Melissa tried to get comfortable in the small bed, but it was hopeless. She sat straight up and closed her eyes. She looked over at Jo, who was still wide awake. All she wanted to do was close her eyes and drift off into sleep. Maybe if Jo saw her sleeping, she would do the same. She was just about to fall asleep when Jo leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"Melissa, do you believe in monsters?"

"Um.....no. Monsters aren't real Jo. They only exist in our minds."

"I see monsters in my room sometimes. They scare me so bad. Nobody believes me. I know the difference between real and pretend. I'm not pretending."

"Jo, if monsters existed, then why aren't they in a zoo or something?"

"Maybe no one has ever caught one."

"Or maybe they don't exist. Can you imagine how much money a monster could make? I know I'd pay money to see one."

"It's not monsters, it's a whole different world, right next door to ours. Sometimes I think I'm the only one who can see it."

"Jo, why would monsters come into your room in the middle of the night just to frighten you? Does that make any sense?" asked Melissa.

"Monsters aren't supposed to make sense. That's why they're monsters."

Melissa had to chuckle to herself. The kid was no dummy, that was for sure.

"Well, I'm right here with you. If any monsters come in here, I will see them too, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you would."

"If I see a monster, we can both panic, okay? Right now, let's get some sleep."

Jo turned over and snuggled the side of her. Melissa put her arm around her. The kid was beginning to grow on her.

Melissa woke up at six thirty the next morning in a new bed in a new house. She wasn't tired, but she certainly didn't feel refreshed either. Her body ached all over from being contorted like a pretzel in the tiny bed. She got out of bed and went downstairs to the kitchen. She found the coffee maker and the coffee. She had never seen a coffee maker like this one before. She poured the coffee in along with the water and turned it on. Five minutes later she was drinking the best cup of coffee she had ever tasted. It was so hot, she had to let it cool.

This is how the other half lives.

She turned on the TV to watch the fake news being delivered by fake people. She could feel the dark clouds forming in her head. Some days she could barely get out of bed and function. Her sickness was getting worse and worse. It wasn't the crippling depression that worried her, it was the fact that she was slowly losing control of her own mind. Some days it was so bad, that she would sit in bed and cry for hours. Some days, the sickness left her alone. You just never knew. She knew she should be seeking some kind of professional help, but that would mean the end of her career. No parent is going to leave their child with someone who has suicidal thoughts. She could simply not inform the agency, but then she would be putting them in a terrible position if something were to happen. Her boss had been pretty good to her over the years. She had even defended her on more than one occasion.

Just how fucked up are you girl?

That was the question she was unable to answer. She had ignored it for over a year. She had tried different herbs and natural solutions. They helped but didn't completely fix it. Some of them almost seemed to make it worse. The more she read about clinical depression, the more concerned she became. There was no cure, only pain. Some people had reported their depression simply vanished. Others went without symptoms for years. They were the lucky ones. She was between a rock and a hard place with no let-up in sight.

Jo came lumbering down the stairs about ten minutes later, carrying a box of her favorite cereal with her.

"Jo, why are you carrying cereal with you?"

"I hide it so my mom doesn't find it. I'm not supposed to have any sugar."

Melissa didn't bother to ask her how she got in the first place. She knew she had to break the ice with her, but she had to remain the one in charge. If Jo thought she was going to just walk all over, *she was sadly mistaken.*

"One bowl Jo, then that box better disappear," she said sternly.

Jo simply nodded. Melissa poured the cereal into a bowl and poured the milk on top of it. Someday this girl was going to be breaking boys' hearts. Some day she would have curves and boobs, just like her mother.

Some day, Jo would realize the situation she was in.....someday.

The following night was a repeat of the first. At roughly 3:30 AM, Melissa was woken up by the sound of Jo screaming. She ran down the hallway and turned on her light. She was in her bed, sitting straight up. She had this blank look on her face, almost as if she were in shock. She was just sitting there, with her eyes wide open, rocking back and forth from side to side.

Melissa was caught off guard. She had seen kids traumatized before, but this was on an entirely new level. Jo looked like she had just witnessed a murder. She put her arms around her and hugged her.

"Did you see more monsters?"

"Yes," she said very softly.

"More spiders?"

"No.....no, I saw *him*."

"Who's him?"

"The man in the bunny suit. The bad man in the bunny suit. He was right here standing in front of my bed.

It then occurred to her that this might not just be a simple case of bad dreams on an impressionable young mind. No, this might just be something else entirely.

Little Jo might have a touch of mental illness. The kind that gets covered up by a lot of money and expensive houses, but is always there in the background, waiting to emerge just like one of her monsters.

"Jo, how old are you?"

"Nine, almost ten. In three months."

"Right. Jo, do you know what it means to grow up, to get older?"

"I think so."

"Well, you realize that certain things are physically impossible and therefore can't ever happen no matter how much we want them to."

"Okay."

"If these monsters existed, wouldn't I see them too? I mean they can't be that quick."

"I know what the difference is between real and make-believe Melissa. I'm not dumb."

"I never said you were. I just want you to realize that monsters don't exist. No matter how much we want them to."

"If they don't exist, then why do I see them every night?"

"Jo...you're a bright girl, let's think this one through here: why would monsters from some other dimension come into your room every night to scare you? Why would they do that? What would they have to gain by it?"

"I don't think they are trying to scare me. If they were going to do something to me, they could do it. I think they are trying to talk to me. The man in the bunny suit. He was like as tall as the ceiling. He said his name was Mr. Sunshine and that he lives in a world without clouds."

"Mr. Sunshine. Okay.....look, Jo, I need my sleep. I can't sleep in the bed with you. I'll be right next door to you. Maybe what you need is just a night light. They can do wonders."

Melissa went back to her room and left the door open. She tossed and turned and was in and out of sleep for the next two hours. She got out of bed around six that morning and went to check on Jo. She turned on her flashlight and left it sitting on her dresser.

There just might be some hope for this poor kid after all.

Melissa made certain all of her duties on the checklist were done. Jo had a tutor come over for four hours a day to help her with her schoolwork. All she wanted to do was drink some wine and smoke a bowl, but she knew if she smelled like pot, that could spell disaster for her. Mrs. Sperling was calling twice a day and now was calling only once every few days. Their ten-day trip had turned into a month-long trip with no return date. The hospital in Austria was so impressed with his ability that they asked him to stay on a little while longer. Their half-hour-long chats were now down to just a few minutes. Melissa wanted to tell her to just get her ass back here and take care of her daughter, but that's what she was paid to do. Be Jo's fake mommy. That's how she was introduced at the local market the other day when she took Jo out shopping in Mrs. Sperling's brand new BMW. She had never been in a car that nice that practically drove itself. They were in line and a friend of the family recognized them.

"Jo, how nice to see you," she said.

"Hi, this is my new fake mommy, Melissa," she replied.

Fake mommy huh kiddo? Yeah, we'll be addressing that one very shortly.

"I'm taking care of her while her parents are away," said Melissa extending her hand. The woman seemed almost put off by handshaking. She barely returned the favor.

"Oh yes, they did mention they were going over to Europe. Jo, how's your tennis game going?"

"Not good. I haven't practiced much."

"Well, we'll expect to see you on the court this summer. I enjoyed our matches."

"Yeah, they were fun."

Melissa never did get the woman's name, not that it really mattered. Everyone in this neck of the woods was fake. Their bodies were fake. Their whole existence was fake, designed to cover up the fact that they were just like everyone else. All the money and jewelry and expensive autos were like Christmas ornaments on the tree.....*and the tree was fake, to begin with.*

Their relationship was going along smoothly. Melissa had made it very clear from the get-go not to test her. What she said goes. She was judge, jury, and executioner in this house, at least until her parents got back. Still, they had fun together, while her sickness was at bay. Some days she was fine, without a care in the world, enjoying her life. She knew it wouldn't last. The sickness would only come back stronger...*with reinforcements.* Jo was a good kid with a bright future, but the more time Melissa spent with her, the more she realized that as normal as she appeared on the outside.....she wasn't quite as normal on the inside. Melissa wasn't sure what it was.

Sometimes Jo would just stare off into space for half an hour or more. Sometimes hours would go by without her saying a word. She didn't watch TV or play video games or seem to have any friends. Almost all of her spare time was spent drawing. She had talent, even at her age, you could see it. She drew in a notebook which she kept in her room. She wondered if her parents had any idea how she was or where she was headed. At some point, Jo would have to decide if she was going to follow in their footsteps or strike her own path in this world. When she did, it was either going to make her or break her. There is little room for artists and art in general in this world. To appreciate art, you have to appreciate the beauty and there is so little beauty in this world, you almost have to imagine it, rather than actually see it for yourself. That's what an artist does, they show the world what is possible, rather than what we see for ourselves. The artist opens doorways we didn't know existed.

Melissa and Jo's relationship never really took off, but it never went south either. Jo seemed to be a very distant, aloof child in desperate need of socialization and Melissa was only here for a paycheck. They did have fun together, but they also spent considerable time apart as well. Mrs. Sperling pretty much kept in contact by text only and even those were becoming more and more infrequent. Melissa had been in this game for far too long to allow herself to get too emotionally invested in these families. She could be fired at a moment's notice for no discernable reason whatsoever. She was with a family for over two years, even allowing her to move into a bungalow above their pool house. Things were going along very smoothly. Out of the blue one day, the husband and wife tell her that her services are no longer needed. Their grandmother will be staying with them and looking after the children at this point. It was a punch in the gut, but a wake-up call as well. When you see your job as something more than just a paycheck, you are setting yourself up for failure down the road. She had been burned one too many times, to go sticking her hand in the fire. She even had a husband tell her he was going to leave his wife for her. That was clearly a lie. He was just looking to get laid. She liked the kids, she really did. That's the only reason she kept her mouth shut.

She thumbed through Jo's sketchbook one afternoon and noticed that she seemed stuck between two worlds. One where life and all of its beauty were shown in detail and the other was just sketches of the most hideous things imaginable. Melissa knew she should just leave it alone, but

Jo was just a kid and a kid in desperate need of being around people that gave a shit about her. She didn't want Jo to grow up to be one of those professional art students whose entire life is devoted to sleeping around and spending their free time in dive bars down in SOHO.

"Jo....tell me about some of these drawings."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, some days you draw flowers and trees, and other days you draw monsters. Why is that?"

"I don't know, I guess it depends on how I'm feeling."

"So some days you are happy and other days you feel like a monster?"

"No. I mean some days I see this beautiful world, right beside us and other days I see the other world, filled with monsters. I never know which one I'm going to see until I do."

"Jo, you've got quite an imagination on you, not that it's a bad thing, I wish I was more like you sometimes."

"I think everybody can see this world, I can't be the only one."

"Jo....I'm not sure if you are aware, but it seems that some of the houses have been broken into on this street. The economy is so bad, that people are getting desperate. I was hoping maybe you could help me out."

"How?"

"Does your father keep a gun in the house?"

Jo suddenly turned away. Melissa knew he did, she just had to find it.

"Jo."

"I heard he and my mom getting into an argument about it. He said he didn't want to be the only house on the block that was unarmed."

"Do you know where it is?"

"It's in his office, someplace."

"Okay. Look, I know you don't want to tell me, I understand. I hope we never need to use it, but things are getting pretty scary out there right now. If we need it, we need it. I have to be able to protect us."

Melissa made dinner for the both of them and then sent Jo to do her homework. She tip-toed into Mr. Sperling's study and began poking around. She figured they hid nanny cams in the house, which is why she made certain the lights were turned off and it was almost pitch black when she entered. She used the flashlight on her phone to go through his drawers. It wasn't too hard to

find. It was in the top drawer in his desk. A pistol, two loaded clips, and two boxes of bullets. She grabbed the gun and one of the clips and put it in her pants. She would keep it in her room. A house down the street had been broken into while the occupants were upstairs asleep. When the homeowner confronted them, things got ugly. This was a gated community that was supposed to offer its residents peace of mind knowing that things like this aren't supposed to happen. The police never did catch the burglars.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Melissa had never even held a gun, let alone fired one before. She used her phone to look up information on how to use it. She had to pray that the mere sight of the gun would be enough to deter a potential invader. No one wants to get shot. Getting shot sucks.

She put Jo to bed and turned on the news. None of it was good. The country was going to hell in a handbasket very quickly. Many cities were now under martial law. The mayors of many cities had lost control. Some of the police had been treated so badly by the elected officials in the city they were refusing to carry out their orders. The National Guard was going to begin setting up checkpoints in the city, along with a dusk till dawn curfew.

Shit had just gotten very real.

Melissa poured herself a glass of wine and closed her eyes. She was like so many other women her age. Lost, alone, and going nowhere quickly. She had taken this job to pay off her student loan debts which were used to pay for a useless degree. She would have been better off financially if she had never gone to college and just worked as a stripper. Some days she wasn't sure if her position had been caused by her sickness or if the sickness had been caused by her financial position. Debt is slavery and in 2022 America, the population was more enslaved than they had ever been.

She passed out in her chair and woke up a few hours later. She went upstairs to check on Jo. She opened the door to her bedroom and for a split second, she thought she saw someone.....or something standing over her bed. It looked like a giant Easter Bunny. She turned on the light and was relieved to see nothing was there. Her heart had nearly jumped out of her chest.

Sweet Jesus girl, don't do that again. She thought to herself as she tucked Jo in. She hoped that Jo's nightmares weren't contagious. She checked the gun in her dresser drawer and made sure it was loaded. If she was going to go down, she was going to go down swinging.

She wasn't sure what woke her up. Was it a dream, or was it something else? Something just woke her up from a deep sleep. She wasn't sure at first. She didn't see it, she felt it. There was something just out of place in her room. She turned on her nightlight and for a second, thought she saw something scurry away in the shadows. She grabbed her gun and ran over to the light switch. She was relieved to see there was nothing in her room. Her heart was racing. She had gone from being asleep to wide awake in less than ten seconds.

Things that go bump in the night.

She went over to Jo's room and checked on her. She saw that her bed was empty. All kinds of alarm bells went off in her head. She ran downstairs with the gun in her hand and began frantically searching for her. She was nowhere to be found. She went into the garage, still nowhere to be found. She checked the cars, then went to the security panel in the front door. The doors were still green. No one had opened them, same with the windows. The security system said everything was kosher.

So where the hell is she? Did she have the security code?

She ran back up to her room and ran inside. Jo was sitting up in bed. Melissa ran over to her and threw her arms around her.

"Jo, where did.....did you leave your room?"

"I had to go pee."

Melissa sat down on the edge of her bed. She was still holding the gun.

"I thought something happened to you. I looked everywhere.....except in your bathroom. Sorry, never mind. Let's get back to bed."

She walked back over to the light switch. Just as she was about to turn it off, Jo spoke.

"You see them too, don't you? That's why you wanted to know where my dad's gun is."

"No Jo, I don't see anything. Some houses on the block have been broken into. I just don't want us to be next."

"Okay.....if you say so," she said and rolled over back to sleep.

Melissa looked at her watch. It was just past four AM. She laid back down in her bed and tried to go back to sleep, but it just didn't happen. Too many thoughts raced through her head. Jo came into her room at five AM.

"Jo, what's wrong?"

Jo sat down on the edge of her bed. It looked as if she had been crying.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Mr. Sunshine said he is going to take me away to his world. He says I will be much happier there."

"Jo, Mr. Sunshine doesn't exist. He is not real."

"Yes, he is, Melissa. He's very real."

"Jo, do you believe in Santa Claus?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cause he isn't real. It's physically impossible for someone to fly around the world and deliver presents to every house in one night."

"Right. So how is that any different than a man dressed in a giant bunny suit coming to see you every night?"

"I don't know?"

"Of course you do. You want him to be real. I get it, we all need friends, even me. Sometimes I wish I had an imaginary friend I could talk to and tell all my deepest darkest secrets to."

"Really?"

"Yes, my very own special friend that only I could see. Wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to me."

"You don't have any friends either."

Jo's words hit her like a rock. Jo was far more perceptive than she had realized.

"No, I guess I don't."

"You don't even have a boyfriend."

"No, no I don't."

"Don't you ever get lonely?"

"Just because I'm alone doesn't mean I'm lonely. I guess this is the life I chose, whether I wanted it or not."

"I don't want to be like you when I'm your age."

"I guess I wouldn't want you to be like me either. Come on, get in. It's still too early for you to get up."

Jo climbed into her bed and was asleep about ten minutes later. Melissa just sat up in her. The tears began rolling down her face. The dark clouds had returned with a vengeance. She knew she had to snap out of it. She went downstairs and put on her jacket. She made some coffee and went out back. She lit up a joint and sipped her coffee.

Weed makes everything better.

She sipped her coffee and took one deep hit off her joint after another. She didn't care who saw her. She was still crying, but with depression, you cry on the inside, not the outside. She was sad

but more angry. Angry at herself for choosing this empty, pathetic life. For listening to her mother. For listening to everybody, but the voice inside of her that had been right all along.

She was going a thousand miles an hour in the wrong direction.

She also knew that Jo needed professional help. She knew what was coming if she tried to help her. She knew this was the first step to try and make things right. She didn't care at this point if she got fired or if she made waves. She couldn't allow the poor kid to go on like this. She had to get Jo to a shrink or child psychologist. This was not a case of an overactive imagination.

This was a case of the beginning stages of schizophrenia.

Jo was right. The last thing Melissa wanted was for her to follow in Melissa's footsteps and be some lonely, pathetic fuckaholic at age 30. All Jo had to do to be happy was to do the exact opposite of what Melissa had done in her life. It was that simple.

She called her boss, who called her boss, who called somebody else. Two hours later, she finally was put in touch with a psychologist. Not just any psychologist, but Dr. Gershwin, one of the foremost analytical specialists in child development. Melissa told him everything. He made it clear that under New York Law if she felt the child was in danger, she had to be evaluated by a doctor. He told her he could be over in a few days and would evaluate her himself. Melissa was relieved. She thanked him and told him she would keep a close eye on her till then. If he felt she was indeed schizophrenic, then he would have to do what he felt was best for her, even if that meant hospitalization. She knew she had just dove head first into a hornet's nest, but she didn't care. It had to be done. Jo was slowly losing her grip on reality. The Sperlings would most certainly fire her. Much to her amazement, her boss said she would back her 100 percent. Melissa hoped she would come through. Rich people have a way of getting what they want, no matter how wrong they are.

She knew she had to keep close tabs on Jo for the next few days. Even closer than she had been. Jo mostly just sat in the living room and drew on the table when her tutor wasn't there. Her schoolwork seemed to be fine, there had been no changes in her performance, so that was welcome news.

She had a major two-fold problem: one was Jo's condition, and the other was her condition. The sickness had come back. Sunny skies had been replaced by violent thunderstorms. She had never been this bad. She wanted to cry all the time, or just sit in a dark room and smoke her weed. Jo's words hit her hard. The kid wasn't even ten and already she could see that her life was not worth living. She knew she needed help as well, but that would come later. Jo was her first priority. She knew she had to talk to the Sperlings herself, but if she mentioned something like *schizophrenia* she would be terminated on the spot. She figured Mrs. Sperling believed that children were meant to be seen, not heard and mental illness may as well come with a giant bullhorn. Mrs. Sperling would just say she is being Jo and to just let it go. She had been around children all her life. She knew what was normal and what was not normal and what Jo was describing was not normal. She seemed almost terrified to go to bed.

She sat on the kitchen table and looked out the window. It was raining and chilly for this time of the year. Dark, cloudy, and miserable, just like her. How had things gone this wrong? She was a

smart girl, yet she made stupid decisions. She had spent the last ten years raising other people's children and now she wanted one of her own, but she was too screwed up to do anything about it. She could barely take care of herself, let alone someone else. No man was going to want to be with someone who has depression. It was becoming so bad that she could barely control it. She was caught in the middle of a whirlpool and going down fast. She had to pull herself out of it, she just didn't know how. Jo was her main priority now, she would have to fix herself later.

Dr. Gershwin came to the house around five o'clock. She figured there was no way in hell Jo was going to open up to him, but the guy was good, really good. He had her talking about art in five minutes. They spent the first fifteen minutes talking about art and the next fifteen minutes talking about Mr. Sunshine. He stayed for over an hour. Jo gave him a big hug and Melissa walked him out to his car.

"Smart girl, but I think we may have a real problem with her. She can clearly differentiate between fantasy and reality. All her cognitive functions seem fine, except for the fact that she believes in this giant boogeyman. She really does believe he's real. That's a problem."

"So, what do you want to do?"

"All I can do is make suggestions to the parent. We can hope she simply outgrows this, that's a very real possibility, if she doesn't then we have to take the next step."

"Which is?"

"That's up to her parents. You did the right thing by calling. God forbid if something horrible were to happen, at least I can honestly say you did everything in your power to try and stop it." he said getting in his car.

"I'll have my recommendations typed up and sent over. When are her parents returning?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"I see. It was nice to meet you.....oh, Melissa, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"You reek of pot. You might want to do something about that. You have to keep your vices very well hidden in a neighborhood like this."

"Right. Thanks again doc."

Melissa's life had become one giant shit sandwich.....without the bread.

There it was. She had another grown-up telling her to get her shit together. She knew the good doctor wasn't just here to evaluate Jo, he was checking up on her as well. Loose lips sink ships and Jo's ship had just been hit by a torpedo. One word about the weed to her boss and she was done. Even though it was perfectly legal, it was not perfectly *acceptable*, not in this neck of the woods anyway.

Melissa made them both some dinner. She held off on the wine drinking, at least for now. Two glasses of merlot and she was ready for bed.

"What did you think of Mr. Gershwin?"

"He seemed very nice. He likes art too. He says I need to continue my drawings. He really liked them."

"Do you know why he was here?"

"Yes."

"Why was he here?"

"To make sure I'm not crazy."

"Why would he think you're crazy?"

"Cause you told him I was."

"No, Jo. I'm just worried about you. I care about you. I know you're not perfect, no one is. I'm just worried about your mental health. I guess if you were my daughter, you'd understand."

"Why don't you have any kids of your own?"

"I don't know, I guess I just haven't found the right person yet."

"You don't have to find the right person to have a baby."

"Yes, you do Jo. Raising a child by yourself is next to impossible. My mother did it and it ruined her financially. I don't want my daughter to have to grow up on government cheese and food stamps."

"Mr. Sunshine says it's because you don't know how to love anyone, even yourself."

Melissa put her knife down and looked at Jo.

"That's quite enough young lady. Mr. Sunshine does not exist. He is not real. He might be real to you, but he is not real to the rest of the world. Next time you see him, send him to my room. I'd love to have a chat with him."

They ate their dinner in near silence. Melissa hurt all over. She was trying desperately to hold it together. She didn't want Jo to see her crying. Her life was being picked apart by a nine-year-old. A spoiled, little nine-year-old who had make-believe friends.

The kid still has more friends than you do my dear.

Sometimes she wanted to stab the voices in her head. The voices were fake friends. The kind of friend you sit with at lunchtime, then tells the rest of the girls how fat you are. Mr. Sunshine is that type of friend. You are just a means to an end for someone like him.

"He says he is going to take me away soon, back to his world. I am going to join his family," she said

"Jo, he isn't real. He can't take you anywhere. I know what it's like to have voices in your head. I know they can be very convincing sometimes, but they aren't your friends. They just tear you down. Don't listen to them."

She was telling a crazy person not to be crazy. Her situation seemed to be getting worse by the day. She called her mother to fill her in, but they were seven hours ahead and she was probably sleeping.

Melissa told herself that as much as she cared for Jo, she was not her mother. She was a glorified babysitter, nothing more. She had become way too close to some of the families over the years. She knew to always keep a distance now. They were not her children. She left a voicemail and made sure Jo had brushed her teeth before bedtime. She sat in bed with her.

"I'll just stay here until you fall asleep."

Jo climbed into bed and turned off the lights. They said nothing to one another until they fell asleep.

Melissa got up a few hours later. All that wine meant she had to pee it out. She used Melissa's bathroom and felt much better. She was still half awake when she came into the bedroom. It was when she was getting into bed that she felt it. She could just sense that something was wrong. Something was not right in the room. She turned on the bathroom light and that's when she saw the nine-foot tall bunny man standing over in the corner. He was so big that he barely fit in her room. She ran to the door, but couldn't open it. She could turn the knob, but the door wouldn't open. The man slowly walked towards her. She knew it was now or never. She kicked the bunny man right in the groin as hard as she could. He didn't even flinch. She frantically looked around for something she could use as a weapon. She saw Jo's autographed baseball bat on the floor and grabbed it. She swung it as hard as she could right at his head. He grabbed the bat with one hand and yanked it out of her hands. He moved closer to her.

Why so sad Melissa? the thing said.

"Get the fuck out of this house. I won't let you hurt her.....I won't!" she said

I don't want to hurt her Melissa....you do." he said and pointed to Jo's TV

The TV turned on and it showed Melissa coming into Jo's room one night holding a wine bottle in one hand and a pistol in the other. She finished the bottle, then drops it on the floor. She shoots Jo several times, then points the gun at her own head and shoots herself. She watches in horror as her lifeless body just lays motionless on the floor of her bedroom. She tries to let out a little scream, but nothing comes out. Melissa is so horrified that she has gone into shock.

The bunny man looked at her and shakes his large bunny head.

An ocean of teardrops.....and the moon turns to blood. he said.

Melissa just falls to the floor and starts sobbing. Mr. Sunshine scoops up the sleeping Jo and takes her out of the bed. They leave the bedroom and close the door behind them. She runs out after them, only to find them gone. Vanished. Little Jo is gone forever.

She sat for over an hour at the kitchen table smoking her joint and drinking wine. She had no idea what to do. She had no idea how she was supposed to feel. The boogeyman had taken her and probably saved her life. This is not how her life was supposed to go. This is not how it is supposed to end, drowning herself in wine and pity. Where was Jo going? What was she doing right now at this very second?

Melissa didn't need a crystal ball to figure out how this one was going to go. No one in their right mind was going to believe her. There were no good options here. Just less painful ones. She got the gun from her dresser drawer. She thought about texting her mother, but what was the point? Her mother didn't care, no one cared. She was so alone in this world. Mr. Sunshine's world couldn't be any worse than this one. Billions of people around you and you are still alone. It just doesn't make any sense. But, not much does these days.

Make-believe has always been better than reality. It always will be.

She wanted to shoot herself. She knew she should, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. There had to be another option, there had to be. If only there was a way. Even a one-in-a-million would be worth trying. Then it occurred to her. There was a way. It had been right in front of her the whole time, she was just too blind to see it. She ran back upstairs to Jo's bedroom.

Take me with you.....or God's sake, please take me with you.....this world sucks so bad.....please!.....PLEASE!!!!!!!"