

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

Gaurav Bhalla
Bedtime

"No, Mummy. Don't put off the lights."

"It's time to sleep, darling." Mummy tucks the quilt under the child's chin.

"No, I don't want to sleep." The child pushes away the quilt.

"We all need to sleep. Don't you want to go to play school tomorrow?"

"No. Read me another story." The child reaches for the book on the nightstand.

Mummy gently restrains the child's hand, "You know the rules, sweetie-pie. Time for beddy-bye now."

"I don't like beddy-bye time."

"That's new, I thought you liked beddy-bye time."

"I used to, but don't anymore."

"Don't anymore? Something happened?"

"Yes."

"Yes? What? Talk to me ... Mummy's listening."

The child looks away, pouts. Mummy nuzzles her child, "Talk to me, Mummy's listening."

"Darkness frightens me, Mummy."

"Nothing to be frightened off, darling, Mummy's right here."

"I don't like when you put off the lights; I can't see you in the dark, Mummy."

"That's because ..."

"And also I can't see you seeing me."

"That's because ..."

"When the lights go out, I disappear, Mummy. You also disappear."

"Sweetheart, I'm right here, you're right here." Mummy caresses the child's cheeks and forehead.

"Not when the lights go off. I disappear."

"Disappear? Where?"

"To a very dark place, deep down there."

"Down there ... as in a valley?"

"No, not a valley, the place has walls."

"Walls? Like a well?"

"Yes, like a well. No, not a well, a cave, like the caves in my Aladdin picture book."

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"A cave? Do you have a lantern?"

"No, but others do."

"Other people are also there?"

"Yes, lots of them."

"Didn't anybody offer to help you?"

"When I disappear, I become a ghost. Others can't see me."

"Anybody there you recognized?"

"I don't know, I was only looking for you, screaming—Mummy, Mummy, Mummy—but you didn't come," the child says in a voice choking with fear.

"I'm so sorry darling." Mummy runs her fingers through the child's hair. "You were right here in your bed when I looked in. If I'd heard you calling, I would have come to you in a jiffy."

"You would have?"

"Of course, I would have."

"How would you have found me?"

"Because I'm your Mummy, I can find you anywhere in this big wide world ... even beyond this world," Mummy says rubbing the child's nose with hers.

The child giggles. "It was very dark there, Mummy. How would you have seen me?"

"Because, I have lanterns in my eyes to see my little one, no matter how dark."

"I was afraid, Mummy, very afraid."

"I would have been afraid too, sweetheart, even more than you."

"What if one day I disappear and don't come back. Then I will never see you again," the child says, in a weepy tone, clinging to Mummy.

Mummy hugs her child. "Never going to happen, sweet love, never. Mummy will always get you back from wherever you disappear."

"Even if the cave is very dark and deep."

"Even if the cave is dark and deep, I can ... and will ... always find my little one."

The child snuggles closer, "I love you, Mummy."

"I love you too, darling." Mummy kisses the child's cheeks and forehead. "Now, no more talking, off to sleep."

"Sleep here with me, Mummy."

"Sweetheart, Mummy sleeps in her own bed, you know that."

"No, you don't, you sleep in Daddy's bed."

"Ok, Mummy and Daddy share a bed."

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"Why can't you and I share a bed? Daddy can sleep on his own."

"There's a reason. It's a secret. I'll tell you, but you have to promise me you won't tell anyone. No one, not even Daddy."

"I promise," the child says, eyes wide with excitement.

Mummy leans forward and whispers, "Because Daddy's afraid of the dark."

"Really, Daddy's afraid of the dark?"

"Worse than you."

"Worse than me?"

"He's a real baby."

The child claps with spontaneous glee, "Daddy's a baby."

"He is. You are so much braver than him, but don't tell him, I"

The door opens, it's Daddy.

"See, what did I tell you," Mummy whispers, tickling the child's tummy.

The child squeals with laughter.

"Daddy, you are a baby."

"What's going on here?" Daddy looks at Mummy for clues. Mummy nods, encouraging him to play along.

"Daddy's afraid of the dark."

"Of course, I am," Daddy says, shivering and shaking to amuse the child. "Very afraid of the dark."

"You're right, Mummy, Daddy's a baby."

The child yawns.

Mummy seizes her chance, puts off the lights, and starts humming a lullaby she's been singing since infancy.

"Come Daddy, hold my hand, nothing to be afraid of. Mummy will find us if we ...," the child yawns, a loud, long yawn, swallowing the last few words.

Mummy places a feathery kiss on the child's eyelids and hums (to the tune of the lullaby):

"Mummy will always come and get you

However dark and deep the cave you disappear to."

"Mummy,"

Mummy doesn't answer. Waits. Watches.

"Mu...."

Head sliding to the left, wriggling to keep sleep at bay, blink-by-blink, snoring faintly, the child sinks into sleep.