

THE MISSING COME HOME

By **Sharkchild**

I awoke to the severe beating of my heart, which drove throbbing percussions through my temples. Beneath me, a sick, cold sweat lined the sheets. My hands were trembling and my throat was raw. I quickly rose from the bed in disgust and discomfort and stood as if leaving the compound of a putrid nest, where I lay to be the toy of playful and malicious ghosts.

Through the window, light beamed heavily from the overly lit moon hanging low on the horizon. Shadows were cast all about the room. They hung and sulked definably, forming characters in shape and personality that spoke out to me in the language of darkness.

Something did not settle right within me; in that moment, everything felt twisted and impure. There were thoughts trailing in my mind that I could not quite grasp but that left strange and potent emotional residues that lingered thickly and deeply. Like fog, they shrouded my mind and left me in weariness.

Feeling disgusting, I went to the bathroom and turned the water on in the shower, allowing it to heat before getting in. Once inside, I let the water refresh and renew my being. The water felt safe; it satisfied my resonating dissonance and brought me back to the equilibrium of my usual self. And as I regained myself, I knew that I needed to check on Sofia. I needed to peer into her crib and see her soundly sucking on her tiny thumb. I needed to touch her fragile skin and kiss her soft head.

I dried off hastily and put on sweats and a shirt. When I was on my way to Sofia's crib, I felt relieved to be just short of looking at the beauty of my life. The expectancy of happiness crawled upon my nerves.

I looked over the rails of her crib and saw that she was not there. She could crawl, but she definitely could not climb; I looked throughout the room anyway, but she was nowhere. I ran back to my bedroom, thinking that my wife had arisen during my shower and had taken Sofia. But she was asleep on the right side of the bed, like every night. Dismally and violently, I shook her, arousing her as fast as possible.

"Sofia is gone," I yelled. "She is gone, I can't find her! Where is she?! Where is she?!"

"Why are you doing this?" Monica screamed once she awoke, tears instantly beginning the scorching of her face. "Why?!... She is gone! She has been for two weeks!"

Memories erupted within me and began their torment:

It was a summer day, heat raining down. Kids were playing in a nearby park. Sofia was in the stroller as I pushed her. Monica was walking next to me. I took a drink from a bottle of water and I passed it to Monica. We set up a picnic under the shade of a big oak tree. I laid out the blanket and Monica got out the food. Sofia was crawling about, laughing as always. I picked her up and twirled her around. She kicked her legs in excitement. We ate egg salad sandwiches and drank lemonade. Monica and I heard a weird clasp ring out throughout the air. We looked towards the sound. There was a man with a strange hat and dozens of balloons out on the grass in a clearing. Sun was on his face. He was popping balloons, over and over—one balloon, two balloons, three balloons. Monica and I

stood and walked a bit closer to get a better look. When I turned back to check on Sofia, she wasn't there. We looked everywhere for her, but she was gone.

I stopped shaking Monica and collapsed at her side, bursting into tears. "I can't think clearly anymore, Monica," I cried. "I just can't get myself to believe that she isn't here. I keep thinking she will be there when I look in her room. I miss her so much."

Sofia's smile was like honey, smooth, rich, and sticky. It felt like she stole another piece of my heart every time she showed those precious, uneven teeth. And almost anything made her laugh—a funny face, a loud noise, even a whisper. I adored my little girl, from her toes to the very tips of her hair.

She had a quirky way about her for as long as I knew, from the foods she liked to those things—those few things—that caused her to cry. Both Monica and myself were far different than her and perhaps that was one of the reasons why I was so absolutely attached to her. I was in awe of every little thing she did—what she was curious about, what she liked to play with, what music made her sleep.

When she was born, I learned many things about myself I had never known. I learned that I was capable of sacrifice, and I learned that I could love, passionately and overwhelmingly. I came to understand that goodness was the wellspring of selflessness—that giving of oneself was the most meaningful act someone could perform.

In those years that Sofia shined in my life, I felt bound in meaning and happiness. I got behind in my work, I fell out of shape, but I lived for my daughter. It appeared as if I cared for nothing but her. I gave her my time and when I did, I gave it completely. I had never known of a joy so fulfilling and tremendous.

When Sofia disappeared, my heart shattered and it never recovered. A grave opened and swallowed my soul while my body continued living. Over and over again I guilted myself with thoughts and regrets:

There was nowhere she could have gone; there was no one that could have snatched her without being seen. If only we hadn't looked away from her, she would have still been within our sight. If I had just held her close to my body, she wouldn't have disappeared—she couldn't have just disappeared from within my arms.

Monica and I left Sofia's room the way it was after she disappeared. We could not bear touching those things inside that only reminded us of her. So instead, we closed the door and decided never to enter. For seven years, the door remained closed.

I awoke again in the middle of the night. Unlike those nights of bad dreams, there was a sound that had awakened me. Somewhere from within the house, there was giggling. Without pattern, it would come and go suddenly, softly and then loudly, and then there would be nothing. I listened intently while still sitting in bed.

Eventually, I slid to my feet. "Hello," I called in a loud whisper out into the vacant spaces of my home. The giggling continued. "Hello," I said again, but still no reply.

In my negation of searching a dark house, I flipped on all of the light switches within my vicinity. Light filled the bedroom and bounced down the hall. There was nothing to be seen, except the closed door of Sofia's room, and the giggle that again sounded from behind it.

My heart sank. I did not want to look behind that door in the middle of the day—in the middle of my bravest moment—let alone when the sound of a child hauntingly sprung from the other side. It had been seven years since that door had been opened.

I began walking cautiously down the hall towards the door. The giggle came to life again, but this time it was stifled, followed by a soft shushing and a whisper that I could not make out.

After I heard that, I felt like being a hero no more. I returned to the bedroom and woke up Monica; I was too frightened to continue alone.

"Monica," I pleaded while rubbing her shoulder with a trembling hand, "there's giggling and whispering coming from Sofia's room and I can't get myself to open it by myself. You need to come with me—just stand behind me."

Monica consented, but was not keen on my behavior until she herself heard the giggle. When she did, she too became terrified at the thought of opening the door. "I don't think we should open it," she said.

"But it sounds like it's only a child," I replied. "Come on."

We made our way up to the door. When we were there, the giggling continued, but grew very quiet. Its production became limited to exhaling through the nose as it was greatly attempted at being restrained.

"I'm going to open it," I said to Monica. "I'm going to swing the door open all the way and hit the lights right away, okay? Ready?"

"No."

"One, two," I took a deep breath, "three."

I opened the door and hit the lights, letting the white illuminate that which so desperately wanted us to see it.

In the room's light was Sofia, naked and as a nine-year-old child, sitting next to her crib. She smiled horribly in a way without intelligence and erupted into joyful laughter with yellow teeth and overgrown nails. Her movements were awkward in coordination and there seemed to be almost no muscle upon her.

Next to Sofia stood two little demon-like beasts. Their eyes were white, their skin was pale and pink, and their mouths curled in glee. They wore garments of black silk, but holes and tears riddled them everywhere. The instant I opened the door, they began jumping up and down and clapping, cheering perpetually in grotesque clicking.

Monica screamed and I could not move.

Sofia held her arms out to us, but still I could not approach her.

At the horror of the sight, I closed the door, slamming it shut on the infernal scene. The excitement on the other side of the door instantly reversed. Sofia began to yell and cry and the pale beasts in black leapt at the door in anger. Strange noises emanated from their mouths—noises like that of those popping balloons so many years ago.

"Monica," I yelled, "I need you to get me the fireplace poker in our bedroom. Hurry!"

Monica hesitated for a moment and then dashed down the hall. She was back within seconds and handed me the tool.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a panicked voice.

“I don’t know.”

The popping noises continued along with the battle over the door.

“I think we should figure out a way to keep the door closed,” I said after some brief moments of thought. “Do we have any rope?”

“That’s our girl,” Monica spoke absentmindedly. Her mind wandered and outlandish logic took reign over her. “It’s her. We should go to her.”

“What about those things?” I lashed back. In that moment, there was nothing I could remember about the Sofia I once knew as a baby. Only the savage, older Sofia with her dreadful smile plagued my mind, and I did not want see that face again.

Suddenly, the popping stopped and the force on the door from the creatures ceased. Monica’s and my breathing rapidly continued, and so did Sofia’s crying.

“Open the door,” Monica screamed. “Open it now! She needs us!”

“I can’t,” I stammered.

Monica ran to the door and pushed me aside. I could barely resist her.

The door once again opened, this time under Monica’s hand, and I watched as she ran into the bedroom to Sofia. She got on her knees and scooped up our daughter, bringing her close in with her arms. Then, in those sounds the creatures made, Sofia began mimicking the popping, attempting to communicate or express herself in those ways she knew.

I looked vigorously around the room for the pale beasts in black, but they were not there. With the same art used for their appearance, the creatures had disappeared—though I held the poker no less as tight. I continued to stand at the doorway and observe the renewed connection between mother and daughter. I, however, could not move myself to greet my daughter. The baby girl I had once adored, I now loathed.

Until I took a step into Sofia’s bedroom, the pale beasts in black did not return, but as soon as I stepped within that domain, the things revisited. One appeared next to me and one appeared next to Monica. They grabbed hold of us and then dispersed from our realm, taking us with them.

Where we went could not be so easily described by words. There was no thing or object of any familiarity. There were no colors. Below our feet, nothing ever substantial ever manifested. And even as a destination seemed to be reached, there was no stopping the petulant feeling of transcendently moving on and on into a nightmare that could never fully be attained.

During and after the teleportation, Sofia was moving around Monica and I with a fluidity I could not understand. If anything could be considered dancing in the place we arrived, then that was what she did. She twirled, traversed, and shook horribly in delight. The pale beasts in black joined her and hummed tragic melodies.

Within my hand, I still held the fireplace poker, and as I looked down upon it, its form and rigidity appeared true. I then stared at my daughter who pranced sadistically about a world that reeked of repugnant and evil spirits. I could endure the obscenities no longer. When Sofia came within my reach, I plunged the tip of my weapon deep into her skull while both Monica and the pale beasts in black looked on. Sofia’s eyes welled in fluid and I saw my little girl once more before she crumpled into the abstractness of the cold dimension.

Soon thereafter, I recognized that place Monica and I arrived.